

Book 7 in the *Little Books on Buddhism Series*

*Second Edition*

# The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth



by Eric K. Van Horn

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of  
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*Dedicated to Sudatta,  
Who through his kindness and generosity  
Became known as "Anāthapiṇḍika,"  
"One who gives alms to the unprotected."  
His acts of generosity included  
Giving the Jetavana Monastery,  
Anāthapiṇḍika's Park  
To the monastic Saṅgha.  
It was there that the Buddha spent  
23 rains retreats and gave some of his  
Most important discourses.*

Special thanks

To my Dharma sister Nancy Herman

Who provided useful criticisms

Of the first section of the book.

*“The safe and good path to be traveled joyfully’ is a term for the Noble Eight Book Path.”*

The Little Books on Buddhism series:

Book 1: *The Little Book of Buddhist Meditation: Establishing a daily meditation practice*

Book 2: *The Little Book on Buddhist Virtue: The Buddha’s teachings on happiness through skillful conduct*

Book 3: *The Little Book of the Life of the Buddha*

Book 4: *The Little Book of Buddhist Wisdom: The Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths, the three marks of existence, causality, and karma*

Book 5: *The Little Book of Buddhist Mindfulness & Concentration*

Book 6: *The Little Book of Buddhist Daily Living: The Discipline for Lay People*

Book 7: *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth*

Book 8: *The Little Book of Buddhist Awakening: The Buddha’s instructions on attaining enlightenment*

Also by this author:

*The Travel Guide to the Buddha’s Path*

# Table of Contents

[Preface](#)

[Preface to the Second Edition](#)

[Terminology and Conventions](#)

[Abbreviations Used for Pāli Text References](#)

[1. Introduction](#)

[2. Did the Buddha Teach Rebirth?](#)

[Backfire](#)

[Rebirth as “Skillful Means”](#)

[Rebirth and the Buddha’s Awakening](#)

[Rebirth and the Fetters](#)

[Rebirth and Stream-entry](#)

[Rebirth and the Subsequent Stages of Awakening](#)

[Rebirth in the Majjhima Nikāya](#)

[3. Is There Evidence of Rebirth?](#)

[Research Into Rebirth](#)

[Predictions of rebirth](#)

[Announcing Dreams](#)

[Birthmarks](#)

[Statements About a Previous Life](#)

[Recognitions of People From a Previous Life](#)

[Unusual Behavior](#)

[Bardo Memories](#)

[Near Death Experiences](#)

[The Tibetan Book of the Dead](#)

[4. Is Belief in Rebirth Necessary for Awakening?](#)

[Consequences Beyond This Life](#)

[The Buddha Only Taught What Was Beneficial](#)

[Elimination of Doubt](#)

[5. The Buddhist Cosmology](#)

[The Realms of Existence](#)

[6. Psychic Events](#)

[Predispositions](#)

[Phobias](#)



[Déjà vu](#)

[Warning Dreams](#)

[Experiences in Other Realms](#)

[7. Implications of the Buddhist Cosmology](#)

[8. Postscript](#)

[Appendices](#)

[Appendix A - Glossary of Terms](#)

[Appendix B - Bibliography](#)

## Preface

*“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion: ‘There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere; and there too I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared here.’ Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.” - [MN 4.27]*

The books in this series up until now describe practices and a level of understanding about life that can be more or less practiced by people from any background. The teachings on generosity and virtue, for example, are practical and non-sectarian. You do not even have to be a religious person to benefit from them.

This is even true of the advanced meditation practices like jhāna. Now it is true that jhāna will begin to take you out of the realm of the secular and into the world of the mystical. This is especially true of the formless attainments. But even jhāna has its counterparts in other religions.

Now we are going to venture into the world of the transcendent. This part of the journey began with the teachings on karma. And of course, in looking at the Buddha's life, the teachings on non-self, and so forth, we have inched our way in this direction. Now we are going to begin to tie all of those things together as we head toward the goal of awakening.

This Little Book describes the Buddhist understanding of the cycles of rebirth and the Buddhist cosmology. This is the problem definition. This is what we are ultimately up against. It's the elephant in the room. The goal of Buddhist practice ultimately is not a favorable rebirth, it is escape from the rounds of rebirth altogether.

Eric Van Horn  
Rio Rancho, New Mexico  
12-Sep-2016  
[nobleightfoldblog.com](http://nobleightfoldblog.com)

## Preface to the Second Edition

In this second round of edits on all the Little Books on Buddhism series, the books have been reorganized to look like this:

A. Basic Buddhist Practice

1. *The Little Book of Buddhist Meditation*
2. *The Little Book of Buddhist Virtue*
3. *The Little Book of the Life of the Buddha*
4. *The Little Book of Buddhist Wisdom*

B. Advanced Buddhist Practice

5. *The Little Book of Buddhist Mindfulness & Concentration*
6. *The Little Book of Buddhist Daily Living*

C. Transcendent Buddhist Practice

7. *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth*
8. *The Little Book of Buddhist Awakening*

The main addition to *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth* is section seven on “Psychic Events.”

I thought long and hard about whether to include this section. Most of what I have written is anecdotal. And to some people, these experiences may appear to be exactly why so many Westerners flee from religion in the first place.

However, at the end of the day I decided to include them. I did this for two main reasons.

The first is that many people have these experiences, and it seems disingenuous to avoid them. I mention in that section that it was over 25 years of practice before I ever heard them discussed. It was actually quite a relief for me, because I have had some of those experiences, but I did not know how to understand them. It turns out that these are quite commonly known in Buddhist countries. Once I heard them discussed, I had a context in which to understand them.

The second reason is that Buddhism has a different way of understanding them. An obvious example is a belief in God. In the West we have people who believe in God and people who do not believe in God. Buddhism believes in God sort of. There is this larger realm of saṃsara in which everything operates. In that realm, even God (Brahmā) is subject to the uncertainties of conditioned existence.

This is why I finally decided to write about these things. However, if they are a real problem for you, don't worry about it. You can benefit greatly from a Buddhist practice without buying into the Buddhist cosmology. I was that way for most of my meditation career.

That changed for me when I first attained jhāna, or more precisely, when I first intentionally attained jhāna. A whole new world of possibilities opened up to me. The possibility of stream-entry became more real. The possibility that a humble, blue-collar meditator like me might attain something higher became more real. And that is the first time that I became interested in topics like rebirth, the cosmology, and awakening.

It took me over 20 years to get to that point. That is not meant to discourage you. I took a lot of wrong turns, and that is one of the reasons that I am writing this series. I'm trying to save you some time. On the other hand, you deal with issues when the time is ripe. Even if I had taken a straighter path, it may have taken me that long to get there anyway. I have never considered myself to be a naturally gifted meditator or particularly prone to spiritual experiences. I'm more of a utility infielder.

My goal is always to help. The practice should never be a burden to you or make your life more difficult. We all have enough of that.

Eric Van Horn  
Rio Rancho, New Mexico  
3-Jun-2017

# Terminology and Conventions

Because the Buddhist Canon that I use is in the Pāli language, I usually use Pāli terms. However, some Sanskrit Buddhist terms have become common in the English language and it seems rather affected not to use them. The two most obvious examples are the words “nirvāṇa,” which is “nibbāna” in Pāli, and “Dharma,” which is “Dhamma” in Pāli. For the most part, I use the commonly known terms. But if it seems awkward to have the Pāli terms in quotes or in certain words (like *Dhammacakkappavattana*) and use the Sanskrit terms in the main text, I use the Pāli words.

I try to avoid technical terms in the beginning of the guide until you can get used to them. However, if there are terms with which you are unfamiliar, they should be in the glossary in Appendix A.

As per APA style guidelines, book names are italicized (i.e., *Foundations of Buddhism*) and magazine articles and Internet resources are capitalized and quoted (i.e., “The Benefits of Walking Meditation”).

## Internet Conventions

There are many references to resources that are on the Internet. This is always a problem because hyperlinks are notoriously unreliable. Thus, I have adopted a convention of putting Internet search keywords in the text as well as a hyperlink to the resource. For example, a reference to Thich Nhat Hahn’s gāthās (“poems”) is “[thich nhat hanh gathas here and now](#).” If links are supported and the link is not broken, clicking on the search keywords will open that resource. If you are reading this in a context where Internet links are not supported or the link is broken, you can still find the resource by doing a search using the keywords. If you use the search keywords, the resource should be the first one in the search result list.

The other case is when an article is cited. It will look like this:

- [Sayadaw U Silananda, "[The Benefits of Walking Meditation](#)"]

Again, if your reader does not support hyperlinks or the link is broken, searching on the author's name and the article name should get you to the article. Some names and words use diacritical marks and you may have to remove them to find the correct resource. For example, for the name "Thānissaro" use the non-diacritical form "Thanissaro."

# Abbreviations Used for Pāli Text References

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**AN:** *Anguttara Nikāya, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*

**Bv:** *Buddhavaṃsa, Chronicle of Buddhas*

**BvA:** *Buddhavaṃsatthakathā, commentary to the Buddhavaṃsa*

**Cv:** *Cullavagga, the “smaller book,” the second volume in the Khandhaka, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)*

**Dhp:** *Dhammapada, The Path of Dhamma, a collection of 423 verses*

**DhpA:** *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā, commentary to the Dhammapada*

**DN:** *Dīgha Nikāya, The Long Discourses of the Buddha*

**Iti:** *Itivuttaka, This Was Said (by the Buddha), a.k.a., Sayings of the Buddha*

**Ja:** *Jātaka Tales, previous life stories of the Buddha*

**JaA:** *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Jātaka Tales*

**Khḥp:** *Khuddakapāṭha, Short Passages*

**MA:** *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (by Buddhaghosa)*

**MN:** *Majjhima Nikāya, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*

**Mv:** *Mahāvagga, the first volume in the Khandhaka, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)*



**Pm:** *Pātimokkha, The Code of Monastic Discipline*, the first book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

**SN:** *Samyutta Nikāya, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*

**S Nip:** *Sutta Nipāta, The Sutta Collection*, literally, “suttas falling down,” a sutta collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* consisting mostly of verse

**Sv:** *Sutta-vibhaṅga: Classification of the Suttas*, the “origin stories” for the Pātimokkha rules

**Thag:** *Theragāthā: Verses of the Elder Monks*

**ThagA:** *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Theragāthā*

**Thig:** *Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns*

**ThigA:** *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Therīgāthā*

**Ud:** *Udana, Exclamations*, the third book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*

**Vin:** *Vinaya Pitaka, Basket of Discipline*, the monastic rules for monks and nuns.

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# 1. Introduction

*“There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?”*

*“I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.’ This is the first fact that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.*

*“I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness.’*

*“I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death.’*

*“I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.’*

*“I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.’*

*“These are the five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.” - [AN 5.57]*

There are three notions in Buddhism that are closely related. These are 1) saṃsara, 2) rebirth, and 3) the Buddhist cosmology.

The word “saṃsara” literally means “to wander.” According to the Buddha’s teachings, beings wander throughout limitless time, lifetime after lifetime, through all the various levels in the cosmos. This includes good births in the heavens, unfavorable births in the lower realms, and

births in the human realm:

*“Bhikkhus, this saṃsara is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. What do you think, bhikkhus, which is more: the stream of tears that you have shed as you roamed and wandered on through this long course, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable — this or the water in the four great oceans?”*

*“As we understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, venerable sir, the stream of tears that we have shed as we roamed and wandered through this long course, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable — this alone is more than the water in the four great oceans.” - [SN 15.3]*

And if you understand the law of karma you know that saṃsara is a risky place. Having good karma improves the odds of a good rebirth, but it is no guarantee. The law of karma is not deterministic. One factor is what karma manifests at a particular time, especially the time of rebirth:

*“Ānanda, there are four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world. What four? Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.*

*“But here some person kills living beings... and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.*

*“Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual pleasures, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip; he is not covetous, his mind is without ill will, and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.*

*“But here some person abstains from killing living beings... and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.” - [MN 136.8]*

Ultimately we want to break free from the rounds of rebirth. It is the only way to guarantee our future. It is the only thing that is unshakeable.

Of course, for many people in the West, rebirth is a difficult topic. We are not born into a culture that generally accepts rebirth. And there are meditation teachers who say that the Buddha did not even teach rebirth as a literal truth.

A second factor is simply evidence of rebirth. How can we know that beings are reborn? We are a left-brained, scientifically oriented society. We value our intellects and rational minds. So where is the proof?

A third factor is the importance of rebirth in attaining awakening. Is it necessary to see into the truth of rebirth to awaken? Or is rebirth simply part of a philosophy, and you can discard it in your path of training?

This Little Book will take on each of these issues, as well as a description of the Buddhist cosmology. I am not attempting to write the definitive proof of rebirth. Like the Buddha, I have an engineer's mindset. If it is good enough and it works, I am happy. This book intends to make a reasonable case.

If you are dead set against these notions, I am not going to convince you anyway. The purpose of the training is to attain awakening. That is what the Buddha taught. He was clear that he was not trying to answer every question about the nature of the universe. He taught a system of training intended to help us solve our fundamental problem of living, to be happier, more useful people.

So my objective is to work toward that goal in that spirit. If you are of a mindset to be open and learn and to seek the truth, I think that I can help you on your way. We are greatly blessed to have a person in the Buddha who went to extraordinary lengths to help us find a way out of our existential dilemma. The transcendent wisdom and insight to which he awakened is humbling. And because of his infinite compassion and wisdom, he taught us how to realize it for ourselves.

## 2. Did the Buddha Teach Rebirth?

The first and most obvious question is, “Did the Buddha actually teach rebirth?” This means the reality of transmigration, in which a being continues from one life to the next. Or was rebirth, perhaps, a metaphor for mental processes like thoughts and feelings? Or did the Buddha teach rebirth because that was the cultural understanding of the people in India at that time? Was he simply speaking to their level of understanding?

In my career as a meditator, I suspect that the majority of my teachers did not believe in rebirth. I even had one teacher say point blank, “The Buddha never talked about rebirth.”

So one place to start is to look at the resistance to rebirth itself. That is because to state categorically that beings are not reborn is to say that you have some evidence that this is true.

So if you will bear with me, I am going to begin this discussion by looking at a phenomenon known as “backfire.”

### Backfire

“Backfire” is the process whereby a person who has an opinion or ideology is presented with facts that their view is wrong. Rather than reconsidering their opinion, they defend it even more staunchly. This is why it is futile to argue facts with someone who is strongly attached to their ideology. The Buddha called this “attachment to views”:

*“The general idea is that it’s absolutely threatening to admit you’re wrong,” says political scientist Brendan Nyhan, the lead researcher on the Michigan study. The*

*phenomenon — known as “backfire” — is “a natural defense mechanism to avoid that cognitive dissonance.”*

– [[“How facts backfire,”](#) Boston Globe, July 11, 2010]

In the Buddha’s teaching, attachment to views is one of the great hindrances to awakening. We often hear that clinging is one of the causes of suffering, but the Buddha was specific about what types of clinging lead to suffering:

*“Bhikkhus, when a Tathāgata, accomplished and fully enlightened, claims to propound the full understanding of all kinds of clinging, he completely describes the full understanding of all kinds of clinging: he describes the full understanding of clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to a doctrine of self.” – [MN 11.14]*

The types of clinging to which the Buddha referred are:

1. Sense pleasures
2. Views
3. Rules (“Rites”) and observances (“rituals”)
4. A doctrine of self

I was very blessed to have a career as a software engineer, because when I was young, I had a lot of opinions. But computers, as I like to say, are coldly indifferent to your opinions. Something either works or it doesn’t. So despite my stubbornness, I was forced to (mostly) adopt a fact-based view of life. This is very helpful in Dharma practice.

Sadly, in our modern society, we have elevated opinions to deified status. I read earlier this year that an ESPN executive said that they specifically hire people for their opinions, not for their ability to be objective or report facts. Mercy.

Of course, it would be very un-Buddhist to ask anyone to accept a doctrine just because the Buddha said it. In fact, I cannot think of anything more un-Buddhist. Buddhist practice is all about experiencing truth for ourselves. That is the whole point of the training. The Buddha himself said as much:

*“If any recluses and brahmins, without knowing the past and without seeing the future, yet claim: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being,’ they can be reasonably confuted.” – [MN 80.16]*

He then went on to say this:

*“Rather, let the past be, Kaccāna, and let the future be. Let a wise man come, one who is honest and sincere, a man of rectitude. I instruct him, I teach him the Dhamma in such a way that by practicing as instructed he will soon know and see for himself: ‘Thus, indeed, there rightly comes to be liberation from the bond, that is, from the bond of ignorance.’”*

The Buddha often emphasized the importance of honesty. I first heard this many years ago, and since that time I have come to understand what the Buddha meant by honesty in a different way. Honesty has, I think, at least the inference of being open to the truth. Inwardly this means being open to the truth about yourself. And I think that in general, meditators do this well, at least after some practice. It is very hard to sit on the cushion hour after hour and lie to yourself about yourself.

But it also means being open to the ultimate truth of how things are. This requires humility. And that is a quality that is in very short supply in our culture. We love our opinions, and we hate to be wrong.





*Figure: Humility*

But “being wrong” is also a way of learning and growing. If we think of it in this way, we can embrace it.

When the Wright Brothers were discouraged by their experiments at Kitty Hawk in 1901, they went back to the drawing board. They did between 100 and 200 experiments on wing designs in a wind tunnel of their own design. They painstakingly created lift tables that are so accurate that it was not until the 1960’s that they could be improved upon, and then only by some trailing decimal points. And it was their sister Katherine who stubbornly would not let them give up. Sometimes being stubborn is a good thing.

This is how to make “being wrong” a good thing. Mistakes are how we learn. The Buddha taught many things that are counter-intuitive. But my experience is that it is worth considering them as possibilities, and then diligently practicing so we can see them for ourselves. But if you refuse to even consider them, even in some subtle way such as feigned agnosticism, you can never realize them for yourself.

I know someone with a Ph.D. in Buddhism who professes to be agnostic on the topic of rebirth. But one day some students were pressing him on

the topic and impulsively he blurted out, “I just don’t believe it!” So his “agnosticism” really meant that he did not believe in it. It might have helped him to be a little more honest and simply say that.

## Rebirth as “Skillful Means”

I have written this before but it bears repeating in this context. I have three understandings about Buddhism:

1. That the Pāli Canon gives a good representation of what the Buddha taught. This is not to say that every word has been transmitted perfectly over 2500 years, but that if you read the Pāli Canon it is clear what the Buddha taught.
2. That when the Buddha awakened he saw into the ultimate, transcendent nature of reality. This is important because some people somewhat trivialize his awakening. Seeing into the ultimate, transcendent nature of reality is seeing truth that is the same no matter what the cultural context. It even transcends the planet. If it is ultimately true it has to be true on Alpha Centauri.
3. That a Buddha or an arahant always speaks the truth.

This last item is important because some people claim that the Buddha’s teachings on rebirth are “skillful means.” The argument is that because people at the Buddha’s time believed in rebirth he was speaking to their cultural understanding.

However, as Thānissaro Bhikkhu points out in his book *The Truth of Rebirth: And Why it Matters for Buddhist Practice*, this was not the case. The issue of rebirth was quite controversial at that time.

Perhaps more importantly, claiming that the teachings on rebirth are “skillful means” is to suggest that the Buddha was saying something that was not true, that he was telling a little white lie. But truthfulness is the most important of the ten perfections, the pāramī. In her book *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* Sarah Shaw says this:

*...it is not just a statement of what is not false but also a steady and even inspiring quality indicative of reliability and excellence of character. It is understood that all bad states in the end arise from a kind of dishonesty.*

*According to popular supposition the Bodhisatta [Buddha-in-training] cannot tell a lie. In one rebirth, the Hārita Jātaka (431), the Bodhisatta, after years of ascetic practice, horrifies himself by succumbing repeatedly to lustful passion through an affair with a beautiful woman. When confronted with gossip about this he immediately confesses... to the king, her husband. As the narrative comments, a Bodhisatta might lapse in other ways but cannot say what is not true.*

- [Sarah Shaw, *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*]

A Buddha or an arahant is incapable of being deceptive. So when the Buddha spoke about rebirth, he was speaking about what he saw when he awakened to the transcendent, ultimate nature of reality.

## **Rebirth and the Buddha's Awakening**

On the night of his awakening, two of the Buddha's three great realizations were about rebirth. In the first watch (four hours) of the night, the Buddha saw into his myriad previous lives:

*"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births,*

*many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion: 'There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere; and there too I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared here.'* Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

*"This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute."* - [MN 4.27-28]

Note also that the Buddha referred to "many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion." This is a particularly interesting detail. It was only in the 20th and 21st centuries that modern science theorized that the universe goes through cycles in which there is a big bang, expansion, contraction, and the next big bang. Like everything else in nature the universe goes through repeating cycles. But this text is about 2500 years old. This provides even more compelling evidence that the Buddha's awakening led to insight into the universal, transcendent nature of reality.

In the second watch of the night the Buddha saw how all beings are subject to the rounds of rebirth, and that their rebirth was linked to the ethical quality of their actions. This is, of course, the law of karma:

*"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy,*

*steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions thus: 'These worthy beings who were ill conducted in body, speech, and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a state of deprivation, in a bad destination, in perdition, even in hell; but these worthy beings who were well conducted in body, speech, and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a good destination, even in the heavenly world.' Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.*

*"This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute." - [MN 4.29-30]*

As the text states, "beings who were ill conducted in body, speech, and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a state of deprivation, in a bad destination, in perdition, even in hell." The criteria here are:

1. Conduct of body, speech, and mind.
2. Being disrespectful to noble ones (arahants).
3. Wrong view.

In light of this discussion, the third item is particularly relevant. The Buddha was quite harsh to monks who misrepresented the Dharma, for wrong view. In the “Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta: The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving ” [MN 22] the Buddha reprimanded the bhikkhu Sāti for asserting a “persisting consciousness” (some permanent entity) that transmigrates from one existence to another is necessary to explain rebirth:

*“Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time.”*

*Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus:  
“Bhikkhus, what do you think? Has this bhikkhu Sāti, son of a fisherman, kindled even a spark of wisdom in this Dhamma and Discipline?”*

*“How could he, venerable sir? No, venerable sir.”*

*When this was said, the bhikkhu Sāti, son of a fisherman, sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response. Then, knowing this, the Blessed One told him: “Misguided man, you will be recognized by your own pernicious view.” - [MN 22.5-6]*

There are many stories in the Pāli Canon of monks who were asked to

explain the Buddha's teachings but did not do so for fear of misrepresenting them. When Sāriputta first encountered the Dharma, it was by watching the bhikkhu Assaji. Sāriputta was impressed by Assaji's "countenance." He asked Assaji about his teacher and his teachings. Assaji was one of the first five arahants. He was fully awakened. Yet even Assaji was reluctant to teach the Dharma for fear of misrepresenting it:

*"I am only a young disciple, friend; I have but recently received the ordination; and I have newly adopted this doctrine and discipline. I cannot explain to you the doctrine in detail; but I will tell you in short what it means." - [Mv 1.23.4]*

I emphasize this point partly because the Buddha emphasized it. As we can see in the passage about the second watch of the night, right view is one factor that leads to reappearance "in a good destination, even in the heavenly world." And wrong view, well, that's not so great. Teaching the Dharma is a great responsibility. That does not mean that you have to believe in everything that the Buddha taught, including rebirth. But it is worthwhile to be cautious about imposing your own values and beliefs on top of what he taught.

Another part of this passage that is worth highlighting is "on the dissolution of the body, after death." This refutes the argument that death and rebirth are metaphors for mental phenomena. A thought does not have a "dissolution of the body." Only the physical body does.

These first two knowledges of the night of his awakening are about the cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth. On the third and final watch of the night, the Buddha had his great insight that leads to the end of the cycle of rebirth:

*"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew*

*as it actually is: 'This is suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the origin of suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the cessation of suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' I directly knew as it actually is: 'These are the taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the origin of the taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the cessation of the taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.'*

*"When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' I directly knew: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'*

*"This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute." - [MN 4.31-33]*

The taints (Pāli: āsava) are:

1. Sense desire.
2. Desire for existence (i.e., continued rebirth).
3. Ignorance.

Those of you who are familiar with the Buddha's teachings on causation (dependent co-arising) will see the connection here between that teaching and the taints. In dependent co-arising, the root cause of our suffering is ignorance, especially ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. In the



Buddha's description of the night of his awakening, you can see that the final step in the process of awakening was the elimination of ignorance, when true knowledge arose.

And then comes the punch line: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."

This is the standard way in which the Buddha described his awakening. I think you would be hard pressed to deny the centrality of rebirth in the Buddha's description.

## **Rebirth and the Fetters**

The Buddha defined awakening in a number of different ways. We have already seen one of them, and that is the cessation of the taints.

Another formula the Buddha used is the fetters. There are ten fetters. Five of these are the lower fetters:

1. Personality view (i.e. a doctrine of self).
2. Attachment to rites and rituals.
3. Doubt in the Buddha's teaching.
4. Sensual desire.
5. Ill will.

The other five are the higher fetters:

6. Desire for a material rebirth (i.e., rebirth in one of the material realms).
7. Desire for an immaterial rebirth (rebirth in one of the immaterial realms).
8. Conceit.
9. Restlessness.
10. Ignorance.

The Buddha's teachings are relentless in their attention to process over objects or things. In both the Four Noble Truths and the teachings on dependent co-arising, the Buddha never talked about a "who" only "what." There is a process of cause and effect without any person or personality behind that process. In fact, it is the attachment to the idea of a person or a self that is the cause of a great deal of our suffering. And when you see into the truth of that process and dis-identify with the mind-body process, that is when you overcome the fetter of personality view.

This leaves the question of what happens after full awakening. What is an arahant? Once again, the Buddha would say that this is an inappropriate question. An arahant after death goes beyond any conventional notion of time and space. Some of the Mahāyāna traditions have a great deal to say about the nature of an arahant (some of it quite fascinating), but the Buddha always refused to describe it. He only encouraged us in the strongest possible terms that this is a goal worth having. Indeed it is the only goal worth having.

The attachment to rites and rituals had particular meaning during the Buddha's time and certainly is relevant in ours. The brahmins believed that one could escape the rounds of rebirth only by the correct performance of rituals. This is part of Hindu practice to this day. The Buddha made a particular point to say that rites and rituals can never lead to liberation or true happiness.

The third fetter goes beyond any doubt in the Buddha's teaching. This would include, of course, his teachings on rebirth. Until this happens, one is still working with faith, although the faith has been transformed over time from blind faith to faith by personal experience and confirmation. When you begin a Buddhist practice, all you have is faith. You have not yet had an opportunity to put the teachings into practice and realize their fruits. However, very quickly you can begin to see the truth of what the Buddha taught through direct experience. And over time this develops into "confirmed confidence," culminating in the complete elimination of doubt.

The fetters of sense desire and ill will I think are self-explaining.

The first two higher fetters have to do with the Buddhist cosmology. The Buddha describes higher realms into which one can be reborn. In some of these, there is a material body and in some there is not. These realms correspond to the jhānas, where the lower four jhānas are “material jhānas” and the higher four jhānas are the “immaterial jhānas.” The fifth fetter has to do with desire to be reborn into a material realm. However, you can also see into the pain and suffering that automatically comes with material existence and lose that desire, while still having the desire for continued existence in a non-material realm.

The issue of conceit is a subtle one. At first it might seem that abandoning “personality view” might be the same as conceit. The issue of conceit has to do with being self-referential. The abandonment of personality view is still done in reference to a subtle “me.” It is “I” who abandoned personality view. In the third higher fetter, even this subtle form of self-reference is abandoned.

The fourth higher fetter is particularly interesting. Anyone who has meditated even for five minutes has dealt with restlessness. It may be somewhat disheartening to discover that restlessness does not go away completely until one has attained full awakening. But this is what the Buddha told us, and perhaps it is also heartening to know that restlessness is a fact of life right up to that point. So you do not have to beat yourself up over your restlessness. It will be this way for quite a while, you are not alone, and perhaps you can simply get to know it and not turn it into a problem.

And finally there is our old friend ignorance.

These are the fetters.

## **Rebirth and Stream-entry**

The Buddha defined four stages of awakening that are framed by the

elimination of sets of fetters. Remember that the Buddha taught the “gradual path.” This is actually good news. You do not have to practice heroically for some undetermined amount of time until you fall off the enlightenment cliff and go from suffering to joy and happiness. It proceeds step by step. You will see the fruits of the practice. Life will get better for you. You will develop a toolbox of emotional skills that will help guide you through difficult times.

This gradual path is true in the stages of awakening as well. It does not happen all at once. You start by working toward the goal of stream-entry. This is an extremely important milestone in your existence. When you attain stream-entry you will become an arahant in no more than seven more lifetimes, and you will never again be born in one of the lower realms as an animal, hungry ghost or in hell:

*“Having undertaken the training rules, he trains in them. With the utter destruction of three fetters, he is a seven-times-at-most attainer who, after roaming and wandering on among devas and humans seven times at most, makes an end of suffering.” - [AN 3.87]*

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*“Here, Mahānāma, some person possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. With the utter destruction of three fetters he is a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination. This person too, Mahānāma, is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.” - [SN 55.24]*

Once a practitioner has entered the stream, he or she is moving relentlessly toward the final goal:

*“Sāriputta, this is said: ‘The stream, the stream.’ What now, Sāriputta, is the stream?”*

*“This Noble Eightfold Path, venerable sir, is the stream; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”*

*“Good, good, Sāriputta! This Noble Eightfold Path is the stream; that is, right view... right concentration.”*

*“Sāriputta, this is said: ‘A stream-enterer, a stream-enterer.’ What now, Sāriputta, is a stream-enterer?”*

*“One who possesses this Noble Eightfold Path, venerable sir, is called a stream-enterer: this venerable one of such a name and clan.”*

*“Good, good, Sāriputta! One who possesses this Noble Eightfold Path is a stream-enterer: this venerable one of such a name and clan.” - [SN 55.5]*

The Buddha used the metaphor of a stream in a number of contexts, but I think in all cases the idea is the same. There are those who are on the banks, on the “near shore.” There are those who wander around aimlessly on the land. Then there are those who take off their shoes, roll up their pants, and enter the stream. And once you enter the stream it will carry you inevitably to the far shore of final awakening and freedom from stress and suffering.

Of course, the attainment of stream-entry is not an easy thing to do. There are barriers to entering the stream. There are the Three Poisons. There are the Five Hindrances. There are self-view, doubt, and attachment to rites and rituals. In order to attain stream-entry, you must work your way through an obstacle course. It requires right effort, and as

we just discussed, right view. It requires all the components of the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is very important to have a stated goal of stream-entry. This is where the secular Buddhists and religious Buddhists part company. The secular Buddhists seek to make their worldly lives better. There is nothing wrong with that. It is certainly better than not doing that.

The Buddha himself was always willing to help people learn to live more skillfully and more happily. There is a section in the Saṃyutta Nikāya on advice to husbands. There is also a section on advice to wives. The Buddha gave advice to kings on how to rule more wisely. He was not single-mindedly devoted to people whose only purpose was awakening.

This is important to say because I do not think that there has to be some sort of war between people whose purpose is worldly and people whose purpose is transcendent. When I came to the practice, all I wanted was some relief from a very painful time in my life. That is true for many people who undertake this practice. Suffering less is always better than suffering more. And over time my life got better and happier. This was due in large part to my practice of the Dharma. Then I started to get curious about the possibilities. How far could I go? I was not in constant pain any more. This let me look beyond the mundane.

Eventually everyone has experiences that give him or her tastes of the possibilities. One day you are sitting and suddenly the mind gets profoundly still. It is a little freaky the first time it happens. Sometimes you need some courage to go back there. But most people when they do go back begin to like it, almost instantly. It is deeply liberating, peaceful, and free from stress. This may not happen very often and may be very hard to conjure up on demand, but life will never be the same. And then you start reading about the jhānas and stream-entry and the seed is planted that there is a world that you never knew existed and that it is available to you. Maybe not easily and maybe not all that soon, but it is hard to walk away from those experiences.

The Buddha described the “four pairs of persons; the eight types of individuals” [MN 7.7]. The first of the four pairs of persons are those working to attain stream-entry and those who have attained the fruit of stream-entry. And it is very hard to work toward the goal of stream-entry without making it the goal. And once you open up to the goal of stream-entry that is a sort of stream-entry itself. This is now the main goal of your life. Everything else becomes secondary.

The Buddha also said that there is a stage that is not yet stream-entry but has great merit:

*“Here, Mahānāma, some person does not possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. However, he has these five things: the faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. And the teachings proclaimed by the Tathāgata are accepted by him after being pondered to a sufficient degree with wisdom. This person too, Mahānāma, is one who does not go to hell, the animal realm, or the domain of ghosts, to the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.” - [SN 55.24]*

In this case the disciple has not yet overcome the fetter of doubt, but has faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. This is not transcendent wisdom but accepting the teachings “after being pondered to a sufficient degree.” So even if there is no great breakthrough, there is great fruit in developing the path as deeply as possible.

However, it is also important to restate the basics of Buddhist living. It is always founded on the ground of generosity and moral behavior. While you are practicing all the various parts reinforce each other. But there will come a time when you are no longer practicing. One day you will

realize that some part of the path is deeply internalized. You no longer have to think about it. You do it naturally and instinctively. In fact, it does not even feel like “you” are doing it. It flows through you. You are a conduit for an energy that comes from some place in the universe. The Dharma expresses itself through you.

This experience will usually start with generosity. It will be the first quality that you master. You will instinctively give of yourself, give of your attention and good-heartedness. If you are able you will pick up the check at dinner. You will see a need and simply fill the void. Some part of your mind will see that generosity now simply happens. It is doing without a doer.

Mark Twain wrote a wonderful, silly essay called “Advice to Youth” in which he advised, “Always speak the truth. It will impress some and astonish the rest.” The same can be said of generosity. It will impress some and astonish the rest.

This will happen with the ethical precepts as well. Non-harming will become a natural energy that flows through you.

I do not eat meat and I have not for a long time. This is not required in the monastic code but it is a personal choice that I make. After many years of not eating meat, I am unable to look at meat without thinking about the animal that died. I do make a compromise and eat fish sometimes because when I am invited to dinner, there are people who cannot see a way to prepare a meal that does not include meat. This is a different kind of generosity. But I always experience some angst. I know that a living thing died, and that all living things want to live.

That is not to deny the reality of natural life. Life feeds on life, and we do that, too. That is all the more reason to live simply and consume as few resources as possible. There is always a cost with something we consume.

The Buddha was clear about our marching orders. We practice generosity. We practice the Five Precepts. We practice the Noble



Eightfold Path.

I keep coming back to this topic because admittedly the Buddha's path takes some time to understand and much more time to cultivate and much, much more time to master. Some choose to over-simplify the path. They undershoot the mark. Then there are those who are only interested in awakening and want to skip steps. They need to back up and return to the basics.

There is no instant path to "success" in the Buddha's path. It happens one mindful breath at a time. There will be mistakes. There may even be the occasional catastrophic failure. Even every act of the Buddha did not turn out well.

So sometimes you need to go back to the basics. Stream-entry may feel like it is a long way off, and it may be. So keep the distant goal forever "in mind" while also working your way breath by breath through the cultivation of the path. And enjoy the journey. Smile along the way. Keep it light. It will impress some and astonish the rest.

## **Rebirth and the Subsequent Stages of Awakening**

Once you attain stream-entry, the next stage of awakening is "once-returner":

*"Here, Mahānāma, some person possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. With the utter destruction of three fetters and with the diminishing of greed, hatred, and delusion, he is a once-returner who, after coming back to this world only one more time, will make an end to suffering. This person too, Mahānāma, is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed*

*from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.” - [SN 55.24]*

A once-returner will, as you can see, only have one more human rebirth. They “diminish” greed, hatred and delusion. Many expositions of the stages of awakening say that a once-returner weakens the next two lower fetters, but the most common formula in the Canon is the attenuation of greed, hatred, and delusion.

You will hear that it is only possible to practice in the human realm. The argument is that the human realm offers the right combination of just enough suffering so that we have an incentive to practice but not so much suffering that we are emotionally crippled and unable to practice. But the Buddha never said that. The commentaries report non-humans like yakkas and devas who attain various stages of awakening. Being a once-returner does not necessarily mean that you will return to the human realm. You might be reborn as a deva, for example, and attain a higher level of awakening there.

A non-returner will become an arahant without ever returning to the human realm:

*“Here, Mahānāma, some person possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. He is one of joyous wisdom, of swift wisdom, yet he has not attained liberation. With the utter destruction of the five lower fetters he has become one of spontaneous birth, due to attain nibbāna there without returning from that world. This person too, Mahānāma, is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.” - [SN 55.24]*

Beings of “spontaneous birth” may be born in any realm higher than the human realm (i.e., the heavenly realms). They are of “spontaneous birth”

because they do not have parents. They simply appear in that realm. However, in the lower heavenly realms there is some evidence of sexual reproduction in the Canon, so beings there may be spontaneously born or not.

Now we are back to the fetter formula. A non-returner destroys the lower five fetters. Also note that for the first time a being is “one of joyous wisdom, of swift wisdom.”

Apropos of the previous discussion of right view, the Buddha specifically refuted any doctrine that does not include spontaneous rebirth or other realms. He went on to say that anyone who espouses a view in which there is no continuation, in which a being simply ceases to exist at death is a “doctrine of fools”:

*“Here, Sandaka, some teacher holds such a doctrine and view as this: ‘There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world. A person consists of the four great elements. When he dies, earth returns and goes back to the body of earth, water returns and goes back to the body of water, fire returns and goes back to the body of fire, air returns and goes back to the body of air; the faculties pass over to space. [Four] men with the bier as fifth carry away the corpse. The funeral orations last as far as the charnel ground; the bones whiten; burnt offerings end with ashes. Giving is a doctrine of fools. When anyone asserts the doctrine that there is [giving and the like], it is empty, false prattle. Fools and the wise are alike cut off and annihilated with*

*the dissolution of the body; after death they do not exist.'"* - [MN 76.7]

I have heard Dharma teachers say that when you die you die, and that is all there is. This is not what the Buddha taught. The Buddha called this "annihilationism" and, as you can see, he specifically refuted it. In this passage the Buddha said that such a doctrine "negates the holy life" that he declared:

*"This is the first way that negates the living of the holy life that has been declared by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully enlightened, wherein a wise man certainly would not live the holy life, or if he should live it, would not attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome."* - [MN 76.9]

The final goal, then, is to become an arahant, someone who is free from the rounds of rebirth:

*"Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork, there is no [future] round for manifestation in the case of those bhikkhus who are arahants with taints destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and are completely liberated through final knowledge." \**

*\*That is, as the arahants have achieved deliverance from the entire round of existence, it is impossible to point to any plane within the round where they might be reborn. - [MN 22.42]*

You can see here, then, that the Buddha's entire description of the path, its goals and its attainments is in terms of rebirth. It would be very difficult to explain his teaching any other way.

## **Rebirth in the Majjhima Nikāya**

One way to quantify the Buddha's emphasis on rebirth is to look through the Majjhima Nikāya and list all the references to rebirth. There are 152 suttas in the Majjhima Nikāya. There are 89 suttas that reference rebirth.

Here is the methodology. This may not come up to strict academic standards, but this is the engineering mentality at work. Engineering is pragmatic. If a bridge doesn't fall down, the problem is solved. The math doesn't have to be perfect.

An obvious place to start is to look for literal references to the words "reborn," "rebirth," and "reappearance." The first two are obvious. The references to reappearance (also "reappearing," "reappear," etc.) are typically as follows:

*"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions thus: 'These worthy beings who were ill conducted in body, speech, and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a state of deprivation, in a bad destination, in perdition, even in hell; but these worthy*

*beings who were well conducted in body, speech, and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the dissolution of the body, after death, have reappeared in a good destination, even in the heavenly world.’ Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.” - [MN 4.29]*

There are also synonyms for rebirth, as well as references to other realms, references to the stages of awakening, and references to aging and death.

Here is an example of a passage that makes an indirect reference to rebirth:

*“Bhikkhus, there are these two views: the view of being and the view of non-being. Any recluses or brahmins who rely on the view of being, adopt the view of being, accept the view of being, are opposed to the view of non-being. Any recluses or brahmins who rely on the view of non-being, adopt the view of non-being, accept the view of non-being, are opposed to the view of being.” \**

*\*The view of being (bhavadiṭṭ) is eternalism, the belief in an eternal self; the view of non-being (vibhavadiṭṭhi) is annihilationism, the denial of any principle of continuity as a basis for rebirth and kammic retribution. The adoption of one view entailing opposition to the other ties up with the earlier statement that the goal is for one who does not favor. - [MN 11.6]*

Here is an example of a reference to other realms:

*“Bhikkhus, I see no one in the world with its gods, its Māras, and its Brahmās, in this generation with its recluses and brahmins, with its princes and its people, who could satisfy the mind with a reply to these questions, except for the Tathāgata or his disciple or one who has learned it from them.” - [MN 13.6]*

And here is an example of a reference to aging and death:

*“When, friends, a noble disciple understands aging and death, the origin of aging and death, the cessation of aging and death, and the way leading to the cessation of aging and death, in that way he is one of right view... and has arrived at this true Dhamma.” - [MN 9.21]*

Feel free to quibble with these choices, but it is difficult to explain any of these references as anything but the process whereby beings are born, live, die, and are reborn in this or another realm.

What follows is the final table. A “y” in the rebirth column means that it is an indirect reference to rebirth. An “x” means that the word “rebirth” is used in the sutta.

	Sutta	Sutta Name	Rebirth	Reborn	Reappearance	Realms	Stages	Aging & Death
1	1	Mūlapariyāya Sutta				x		
2	4	Bhayabherava Sutta			x			
3	6	Akankheyya Sutta					x	
4	7	Vatthūpama Sutta				x		
5	9	Sammāditṭhi Sutta						x
6	11	Cūḷasihanāda Sutta	y					
7	12	Mahāsīhanāda Sutta	x	x				
8	13	Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta				x		
9	14	Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta		x				
10	16	Cetokhila Sutta				x		
11	18	Madhupiṇḍika Sutta				x		
12	19	Dvedhāvītaka Sutta	y					
13	22	Alagaddūpama Sutta	y					
14	23	Vammika Sutta				x		
15	24	Rathavinīta Sutta	y					
16	26	Ariyapariyesanā Sutta			x			
17	27	Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta	y					
18	31	Cūḷagosīṅga Sutta				x		
19	34	Cūḷagopālaka Sutta				x		
20	36	Mahāsaccaka Sutta	y					
21	37	Cūḷataṇhāsankhaya Sutta	y					
22	38	Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta	x					
23	39	Mahā-Assapura Sutta			x			
24	40	Cūḷa-Assapura Sutta	x					
25	41	Sāleyyaka Sutta		x				
26	42	Verañjaka Sutta		x				
27	45	Cūḷadhammasamādāna Sutta	y					
28	46	Mahādhammasamādāna Sutta	y					
29	47	Vīmaṅsaka Sutta				x		
30	48	Kosambiya Sutta					x	
31	50	Māratajjaṇiya Sutta	y					
32	51	Kandaraka Sutta			x			
33	52	Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta				x		
34	53	Sekha Sutta	y					
35	54	Potaliya Sutta	y					
36	56	Upāli Sutta	x	x				
37	57	Kukkuravatika Sutta			x			
38	60	Apaṇṇaka Sutta		x				
39	64	Mahāmālunkya Sutta				x		
40	65	Bhaddāli Sutta			x			
41	67	Cātuma Sutta				x		
42	68	Naḷakapāna Sutta			x			
43	71	Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta	y					
44	73	Mahāvaccchagotta Sutta				x		
45	75	Māgandiya Sutta			x			



	Sutta	Sutta Name	Rebirth	Reborn	Reappearance	Realms	Stages	Aging & Death
46	76	Sandaka Sutta	x		x			
47	77	Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta	y					
48	79	Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta			x			
49	81	Ghaṭikāra Sutta	y					
50	82	Ratṭhapāla Sutta				x		
51	83	Makhādeva Sutta			x			
52	84	Madhurā Sutta	y					
53	86	Angulimāla Sutta	x					
54	90	Kaṇṇakattala Sutta	y			x		
55	91	Brahmāyu Sutta	y			x		
56	92	Sela Sutta	y					
57	93	Assalāyana Sutta	Y			x		
58	96	Esukāri Sutta		x				
59	97	Dhānañṇi Sutta				x		
60	98	Vāseṭṭha Sutta	y					
61	99	Subha Sutta				x		
62	100	Saṅgāra Sutta				x		
63	101	Devadaha Sutta			x			
64	105	Sunakkhatta Sutta	y					
65	106	Aneñjasappāya Sutta	x					
66	108	Gopakamoggalāna Sutta	y					
67	109	Mahāpunṇama Sutta	y					
68	110	Cūḷapunnama Sutta		x				
69	112	Chabbisodhana Sutta	y					
70	114	Sevitabbāsevitabba Sutta		x				
71	117	Mahācattārisaka Sutta		x				
72	118	Anāpānasati Sutta					x	
73	120	Sankhārupapatti Sutta			x			
74	121	Cūḷasuññata Sutta	y					
75	123	Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta		x				
76	124	Bakkula Sutta	y					
77	125	Dantabhūmi Sutta				x		
78	127	Anuruddha Sutta	x		x			
79	129	Bālapaṇḍita Sutta		x				
80	130	Devadūta	Y			x		
81	134	Lomasakangiya-bhaddekaratta Sutta				x		
82	135	Cūḷakammavibhanga Sutta		x				
83	136	Mahākammavibhanga Sutta	x					
84	140	Dhātuvibhanga Sutta	y					
85	142	Dakkhiṇāvibhanga Sutta					x	
86	143	Anāthapiṇḍikovāda Sutta				x		
87	144	Channovāda Sutta	y					
88	146	Nandakovāda Sutta					x	
89	148	Chachakka Sutta	y					

# 3. Is There Evidence of Rebirth?

*Some young children say that they have been here before. They give various details about previous lives, often describing the way in which they died. Of course, young children say a lot of things, and we may simply think that they are fantasizing as children often do. But what if, in a number of instances, people listened to the children and then tried to find out if the events they described had actually happened? And what if, when those people went to the places the children had named, they found that what the children had said about the past events was indeed true? What then?*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

As I mentioned, I have been to many meditation retreats where the teachers either did not believe in rebirth or professed to be agnostic on the issue. Yet, as we have seen, rebirth shows up repeatedly in the Buddha's teachings. One way to deal with this issue is to try and find evidence that rebirth is true.

Here I am going to make what may seem like a fine point, but it is worth saying. There is a difference between proof and evidence. Proof is incontrovertible. It means that something is certainly true. Evidence indicates that it may be true, or that it is true "beyond a reasonable doubt."

I don't think you can prove that rebirth is true, but there may be enough evidence to argue that it is true, or may be true, or is probably true.

If you do a search on the Internet for the key words “reincarnation” and “proof” you will get a long list of entries. I am not going to present a definitive look at all these cases. I do hope, however, to provide some general evidence and give an idea of the kind of research there is on rebirth.

Let me start by making a distinction that only a Buddhist would make and that is the difference between reincarnation and rebirth. I did not invent this distinction; I am simply borrowing it. Buddhists want to be clear that unlike what the Hindus and Jains believe, there is no permanent entity that is reborn. Hindus, for example, believe that ultimately you become one with Brahmā, and that is how you escape the rounds of rebirth. That is reincarnation.

The Buddha, however, famously declared that there is no permanent entity like a soul. Everything in the universe is a product of cause and effect, what in secular terms is called “radical phenomenology.” And one reason we suffer is because we self-identify with mind and body processes that are constantly changing. This attachment is the problem. To be sure, the Buddha never said whether there is a self or not. This issue is known in Buddhism as one of the “Great Imponderables.” Rather, the Buddha emphasized our attachment to the mind and body as the cause of suffering, and that to be free from this suffering we must learn how to abandon that attachment.

So when a Buddhist talks about rebirth, it is in terms of the continuation of this process. Nirvāṇa is when this process ends, you become free, and you enter into a realm that is beyond time and space.

## **Research Into Rebirth**

The longest ongoing research project into rebirth is at the University of Virginia. Dr. Ian Stevenson started it in the 1950’s. This work continues today at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the medical school. You can go to their website for the latest news.

Over time their research came up with a categorization system for rebirth experiences. They divide them into the following groups:

1. Predictions of rebirth. These are quite specific and sometimes include who the future parents will be.
2. An announcing dream. This is a dream – usually with the mother – about who the child to be born was in a previous life.
3. Birthmarks. These are birthmarks that relate to an experience in the previous life. Sometimes this relates to a trauma like surgery or a gunshot.
4. Statements about a previous life. To rule out certain types of fraud the research at the University only uses children between the ages of two and five. The studies also require at least one other person to corroborate the story.
5. Recognitions of people from the previous life. The child will know someone who was a friend or relative.
6. Unusual behavior. This may show up in play such as using the name of a child from the previous life or a phobia or emotional reaction from a previous life.

As noted in item four, the studies over time began to focus on children to rule out the possibility of fraud. Children are often not in a situation where they could know the circumstances of the person they report to have been.

## **Predictions of rebirth**

Predictions of rebirth are, according to Tucker, rare. However, they are well-known in Tibet. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are two types of lamas: those who have trained to become lamas in this lifetime and those who are reincarnated lamas from a previous lifetime. Reincarnate lamas are called “tülku” or “sprul sku” lamas. The most famous tülku lineage is the Dalai Lama, who is from the Gelug or “yellow hat” lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapas, Khyentses, and Kongtruls are also well-known tülkus.

Tibetan Buddhists have studied the death process and brought it to high art. Most people know about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or *Bardo Todol*. “Bardo” means “in-between state.” “Bardo Thodol” means “liberation through hearing during the in-between state.” Tibetan Buddhists also do a practice called “phowa” or “conscious dying.” This is what enables a tülku to control their rebirth. When a tülku dies they also leave some indication of where they will be reborn:

*When an old tülku dies, a committee of senior lamas convenes to find the young reincarnation. The group may employ a number of methods in their search. First, they will probably look for a letter left behind by the departed tülku indicating where he intends to be born again. They will ask the close friends of the departed to recall everything he said during his last days, in case he may have given hints. Often, an oracle is consulted. Sometimes a prominent lama has a dream that reveals details of the child’s house, parents, or of geographical features near his home. Sometimes heaven presents a sign, perhaps a rainbow, leading the search party to the child.*

- [Pamela Logan, “[Tulkus in Tibet](#)”, Harvard Asia Quarterly]

Once they find a candidate child they will administer a test. This typically consists of placing objects in front of the child. If the candidate is the true rebirth he (and as of recently *she*, as well) will choose objects that belonged to him in the previous life. The child will also sometimes recognize people on the committee.

Predicting a future rebirth is also known among the Tlingit tribe of Native Americans:

*The Tlingits, a tribe in Alaska, frequently make*

*predictions about rebirth. Of forty-six cases there, the previous personality made a prediction about his or her subsequent rebirth in ten of them. In eight of the ten, the person gave the names of the parents to which he or she wanted to be reborn. For example, a man named Victor Vincent told his niece that he was going to come back as her son. He showed her two scars he had from minor surgeries and predicted that he would carry those marks to his next life. Eighteen months after he died, she gave birth to a boy who had birthmarks in the same spots. One of them even had small round marks lined up beside the main linear mark, giving the appearance of stitch wounds from a surgical scar. The boy later said that he was the previous personality, and he seemed to recognize several people from Victor's life.*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

## **Announcing Dreams**

Sometimes there is an “announcing dream.” A member of the family (usually the mother) will have a dream in which the person to be born will “announce” their arrival. This usually happens in families where the person being born was also previously from that family. The dream can even happen before the pregnancy occurs.

*...usually the subject's mother, has a dream before or during the pregnancy in which the previous personality either announces that he or she is coming to the expecting mother or asks to come to her. Such dreams usually occur in same-family cases, ones in which the previous personality is a deceased member of the subject's family, or in cases in which the subject's mother at least knew the previous personality... Cases from all*

*the various cultures have included announcing dreams, which have occurred in approximately 22 percent of the first 1,100 cases in our computer database. They are much more common in some places than others, and they also tend to occur at different times in different places. In Myanmar, families generally report that the dreams occur before the child is conceived, whereas among the tribes in northwest North America, they tend to occur at the very end of the pregnancy.*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

There is a corollary to this in the life of the Buddha. The night before conception, the Buddha's mother Maya had just this type of dream:

*The day when the Buddha was to be conceived [Maya] kept fast; and at night she had a dream. In her dream she saw that the four devas, called the Chatumaharajas, took her to the Himava and placed her on a bed under a Sal tree. Then the wives of the devas came and bathed her in the Lake Anottata and dressed her in divine robes. They then took her to a golden palace and laid her in a magnificent couch, where the Bodhisatta in the form of a white elephant holding a white lotus in his resplendent trunk entered her womb through her right side. That was a full-moon day of Uttara Asalha to mark the beginning of a seven-day festival. She, too, had participated in the festival. Furthermore, on that day she did not sleep with her husband. - [Ja 73]*

One of the stories that Tucker tells is about a boy from Turkey. This boy was also born with a birth defect that related to his previous life:

*His mother dreamed during her pregnancy that a man*

*she did not recognize told her, "I was killed with a blow from a shovel. I want to stay with you and not anyone else." When Süleyman was born, the back of his skull was partially depressed, and he also had a birthmark there. When he became able to talk, he said that he had been a miller who died when an angry customer hit him on the head. Along with other details, he gave the first name of the miller and the village where he had lived. In fact, an angry customer had killed a miller with that name in that village by hitting him on the back of the head with a shovel.*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

## **Birthmarks**

Dr. Stevenson and Dr. Tucker took a particular interest in birthmarks. Birthmarks often indicate some event in the previous life. He begins his book with a story about a police officer who was shot and killed while on duty. Subsequently a boy was born to his widow with memories of that incident, including the day on which it occurred. The boy had birthmarks and birth defects where he had been shot.

People under hypnosis are known to be able to affect physical changes:

*One of the most striking examples seen in hypnotic applications is that even a wound can appear on the skin of the hypnotized person through inculcation. For example, Paul Thorsen, a researcher, touches the arm of the person under hypnosis with a tip of a pen and tells him that it's a hot skewer. Soon, a blister (as would have been produced by a second degree burn) formed in the region where the tip of the pen touched. Thorsen also hypnotized a person called Anne O. into believing that*



*the letter A was being drawn onto her arm by pressing hard. Although nothing else was done, redness emerged in the shape of an "A" in that area.*

- [Poul Thorsen, *Die Hypnose in Dienste der Menschheit*, Bauer-Verlag, Freiburg-Haslach, 1960, p. 52-53]

So there is at least the possibility that consciousness in the womb is capable of affecting physical changes. This would also be in line with the Buddhist notion that consciousness is a powerful force, an idea that is now promoted in quantum physics as well.

## **Statements About a Previous Life**

For me these are the most compelling stories, especially because they come from such young children:

*The late Dr. Eli Lasch, who is best known for his medical work in Gaza as part of Israeli government operations, studied the case of a 3-year-old boy who lived near the border of Syria and Israel. The boy said he remembered being killed with an axe in his previous life. He showed village elders where his body was buried, where the murder weapon was buried, and he identified his killer. A body with a head wound was indeed found in the spot indicated, the axe was found, and the killer admitted what he had done.*

- [Tara McIsaac, "[10 Outstanding Cases of Detailed, Verified 'Past-Life Memories'](#)", Epoch Times, November 24, 2015]

These stories are common and easy to find. In addition to the memories of children, some scientists are now using hypnosis and a process called "past life regression." Some of the information you will find on the

Internet is rather unkind to this technique. However, some of the cases are hard to refute. Because these cases are usually adults it is a little easier to attack the results.

Nonetheless, at least one skeptic changed sides after her own investigation:

*Dr. Helen Wambach (Ph.D.) was one of the earliest scientific researchers into past lives and reincarnation. She was the author of "Reliving Past Lives" and "Life Before Life."*

*Initially motivated by a desire to debunk reincarnation, beginning in the mid-1960s, Helen Wambach conducted a 10-year survey of past-life recalls under hypnosis among 1,088 subjects. She asked very specific questions about the time periods in which people lived and the clothing, footwear, utensils, money, housing, etc. which they used or came in contact with. Wambach found peoples' recollections to be amazingly accurate and wrote that "fantasy and genetic memory could not account for the patterns that emerged in the results. With the exception of 11 subjects, all descriptions of clothing, footwear, and utensils were consistent with historical records."*

*Victor Zammit describes Wambach's research thus:*

*By doing a scientific analysis on the past lives reported by her 10,000 plus volunteers she came up with some startling evidence in favor of reincarnation:*

- *50.6 % of the past lives reported were male and 49.4 % were female — this is exactly in accordance with biological fact.*
- *The number of people reporting upper class or*

*comfortable lives was in exactly the same proportion to the estimates of historians of the class distribution of the period.*

- *The recall by subjects of clothing, footwear, type of food and utensils used was better than that in popular history books. She found over and over again that her subjects knew better than most historians — when she went to obscure experts her subjects were invariably correct.*

*Her conclusion was: “I don’t believe in reincarnation — I know it!”*

- [Carol Moore, “[Dr. Helen Wambach And Reincarnation](#)”]

One of my favorite stories comes from the Buddhist world. It is about a boy named “Dhammaruwan,” who was then a little boy in Sri Lanka. At the age of three he started doing lengthy chants in Pāli. His father, knowing that something unusual was going on, had the prescience to record him:

*Dhamma Ruwan was born in 1968 in a village to the north of Kandy. At the age of two he was adopted by a well-to-do couple in Kandy. There are many stories around the infancy of Dhamma Ruwan even before the age of two which relates to rebirth and meditation practice.*

*At the age of three in “Kelstan” Kandy he started to chant a certain verse of “Dammaccakka Sutta” (“Chakkukarani Nayanakarani...”). Ever since that day he has been chanting suttas from the tripitaka (Pāli Cannon) with little or no mistakes.*

*The chanting style of these suttas are his own and*

*nowhere else to be found or trace back to. As the child grew in age and was able to speak more, he related where he learnt this particular style of chanting the suttas and how he was able to chant such deep and profound suttas, which even an adult find difficult to chant precisely. He has said that in 6th century A.C. he together with few monks accompanied the scholar Monk, Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa to Sri Lanka. He has said that including him (Mudithagosa) the others were monks who had by-heartened the tripitaka or part of it. He says it is from this memory that he chants the suttas by recollecting that life. Until the age of 10 he was able to chant the suttas. The earliest recorded chanting was at the age of three. In 1975, at 7, he joined a leading Buddhist school in Kandy for his education.*

- ["Dhammaruwan, boy chanted in ancient Pāli", <https://chanhniem.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/dhammaruwan-boy-chanted-in-ancient-pali/>]

You can hear some of his chants online by doing a search for "[pirith Dhammaruwan Dhammacakka](#)." (A "pirith" is a protective chant.) Dhammaruwan is a Dhamma teacher today and runs an organization called the "Nirodha Trust."

I am quite fond of his chanting. Despite the relatively poor quality of the recording, they are beautifully rendered. One of the chants is the "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: The Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma," [SN 56.11] which was the Buddha's first discourse. This discourse takes about 28 minutes to chant. Even an adult would be hard-pressed to chant it, much less in a 1,000 plus year-old style.

## **Recognitions of People From a Previous Life**

Sometimes the connection to a previous life comes from a child recognizing someone they knew in the previous incarnation. They also often recognize buildings like previous homes or objects they owned like cars:

*Chanai Choomalaiwong was born in central Thailand in 1967 with two birthmarks, one on the back of his head and one above his left eye. When he was born, his family did not think that his birthmarks were particularly significant, but when he was three years old, he began talking about a previous life. He said that he had been a schoolteacher named Bua Kai and that he had been shot and killed while on the way to school. He gave the names of his parents, his wife, and two of his children from that life, and he persistently begged his grandmother, with whom he lived, to take him to his previous parents' home in a place called Khao Phra. Eventually, when he was still three years old, his grandmother did just that. She and Chanai took a bus to a town near Khao Phra, which was fifteen miles from their home village. After the two of them got off the bus, Chanai led the way to a house where he said his parents lived. The house belonged to an elderly couple whose son, Bua Kai Lawnak, had been a teacher who was murdered five years before Chanai was born. Chanai's grandmother, it turned out, had previously lived three miles away. Since she had a stall where she sold goods to many people in the surrounding area, she vaguely knew Bua Kai and his wife. She had never been to their home and had no idea to whose home Chanai was leading her. Once there, Chanai identified Bua Kai's parents, who were there with a number of other family members, as his own. They were impressed enough by his statements and his birthmarks to invite him to return*

*a short time later. When he did, they tested him by asking him to pick out Bua Kai's belongings from others, and he was able to do that. He recognized one of Bua Kai's daughters and asked for the other one by name. Bua Kai's family accepted that Chanai was Bua Kai reborn, and he visited them a number of times. He insisted that Bua Kai's daughters call him "Father," and if they did not, he refused to talk to them.*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

## **Unusual Behavior**

The final case is when a child exhibits an unusual behavior related to the previous persona. This often happens through play. The child may use the name of someone from their previous life or take an interest in something from the previous life. Or they may simply have a behavior trait that is the same as the previous life.

*Sukla Gupta in India is another subject who showed great emotion. She was less than two years old when she began the habit of cradling a block of wood or a pillow and calling it "Minu." She said that Minu was her daughter, and during the next three years, she gradually spoke more about a previous life. She gave a number of details, including the name and section of a village eleven miles away. A woman there who had an infant daughter named Minu had died six years before Sukla was born and was identified as the previous personality. When Sukla was five years old, her family went to meet the family of the previous personality. She cried when she met Minu, then eleven years old, and she appeared affectionate and maternal toward her. At one point, one of the previous personality's cousins tested Sukla by*

*telling her falsely that Minu was sick with a high fever. Sukla began to weep, and she could not be comforted for some time. In another instance, Minu actually was sick, and when Sukla learned the news, she began crying and demanded to be taken to her. She remained agitated until the next day when her family took her to see Minu, who had improved by then.*

- [Jim Tucker, MD, *Life Before Life*]

## **Bardo Memories**

People who have memories of previous lives also sometimes remember the time in between. The Tibetans call this a “bardo.” From a Buddhist standpoint these cases can be problematical in that the person tends to overlay their cultural conditioning onto the experience. (This is true of a lot of this type of research.) So if the person is a theist, they often attribute certain phenomena to God. But it is nonetheless interesting that some people have memories of other realms. These would be very difficult for a young child to fabricate.

It is also possible for a person who has a strong will to determine their next rebirth. Dr. Tucker relates the case of an elderly woman who wanted to be reborn as a man because her husband had a mistress and in her next life she wanted to have one, too. This happened, although it was not without its complications. In almost every way the boy child exhibited female behaviors and preferences.

But what I find most interesting is the ability to use strong will to affect rebirth. There may be the possibility to cause our next rebirth to happen in such a way that we can continue to, for example, practice the Dharma. That would be an extremely auspicious way to use our will power at the time of death.

## **Near Death Experiences**

*The next thing I know, I was out of my body. I felt absolute peace and love as I saw myself lying down on the bed. Then almost immediately, I was in a white gown with lace and a long veil like a princess on her wedding day. I also had flowers in my hair. My hair was tied up like in a bun. Although it was me in that dress, I could also see myself as if I were behind me. The white of the gown was so beautiful, pearly-white and soothing to the eyes. I remember the touch of cool breeze on my face. It was so perfect; not too cold but somewhat fresh. It was as if the breeze repaired any part of my body that was either damaged or distressed. I cannot explain the beauty of the breeze as it touched parts of my face, like a baby with new skin. I felt like I was radiating that same white light that was in front of me.*

- [B. Preeti, "[Individual Near Death Experience](#)", Near Death Experience Research Foundation]

Making sense of Near Death Experiences (NDE) is maddeningly difficult. This is partly because most of the studies of NDE's have been done in the West, and people with one of two cultural biases have done all the interpretation of NDE's. The first bias is theistic, a belief in God and heaven. The first book I read on NDE's was *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* by Dr. Eben Alexander. This book is well-known and gained extra merit because it was written by a neurosurgeon.

But personally I found the book incredibly frustrating because about 10% of it is a raw description of his experience, but the rest of it is interpretation based on cultural conditioning. It is very hard to separate out the actual experience of the NDE from his analysis based on his personal beliefs.

The opposite side of the argument comes from neurologists who have a



belief that the brain is the basis for all mental activity:

*If it really is occurring when some NDE researchers claim that it is, during a period of flat EEG with no cortical activity, then modern neuroscience would require serious revision.*

- [French, Chris, "[Near-Death Experiences in Cardiac Arrest Survivors](#)", Progress in Brain Research]

This is the doctrine of "philosophical materialism," i.e., that all that exists is physical reality. People of this ilk tend to be annihilationists, that is, they believe that when the body dies, that ends existence for that person.

So you have two extreme positions that are hindered by their own ideologies.

This brings up some general comments about special hindrances we have in the West. One is what I think is the arbitrary distinction between science and religion. That is a distinction that for the most part does not exist in Asia. In fact, in places like China and Tibet there were many great scientists who were Buddhist monks. In China there were many Taoist scientists as well.

But in the West we evolved from the Bible being the foundation for both spiritual and scientific thinking. As time went by the science of the Bible was debunked, and this led to a split between the scientific and religious worlds:

*In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many European Romantics and American Transcendentalists found that they couldn't accept the worldview of the Bible because they were born in an era of new scientific discoveries — of geological deep time and astronomical deep space — that called the biblical worldview into question. Nevertheless, they valued many*

*of the psychological teachings the Bible contained. So they developed an historical approach to the Bible, stating that its worldview may have fit in with the cultural presuppositions of the time when it was written, but that that worldview had to be discarded as science advanced. Only then could the Bible's psychological insights survive in the modern world. And not only survive: actually develop to a higher level. By dropping its out-of-date worldview and leaving cosmology to the scientists, the Judeo-Christian tradition could focus more precisely and effectively on the proper sphere of all religions: the development of the human psyche. This approach formed the basis of liberal Christianity and Reform Judaism.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Truth of Rebirth: And Why It Matters for Buddhist Practice*]

It is also worth making a special note about Buddhism and science. The Dalai Lama has famously written:

*If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.*

- [Dalai Lama XIV, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*]

This is, of course, to his credit, and the Dalai Lama has always been very interested in science and engineering. Unfortunately, I think this oft-quoted phrase gives the mistaken impression to Westerners that Buddhism suffers from the same disconnect between religion and science. Part of the problem is that Tibetan Buddhism is a conglomeration of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism. And that conglomeration brought with it elements such as the earth is flat. That is something brought over from animistic religion. But you will not find

this in the Buddha's original teachings. In fact the cosmos as described in the Pāli Canon is very like the universe that modern astronomy describes.

The one exception to this is the occasional reference to Mount Mehru, which ancient Indians believed was the center of the universe. These references may have been inserted later or they might be metaphorical, mythological references. But the rest of the Pāli Canon describes a universe with many worlds and world systems, and in a way that makes a modern reader very comfortable.

So in summary, we have a large body of raw evidence that is almost always interpreted by Western theists to prove that God and heaven exist, and by neurologists as physical phenomena that are artifacts of brain activity. It is almost impossible to find research into NDEs that looks purely at the raw data and raw experiences.

To a Buddhist – and of course I am now overlaying my own prejudices – the interpretations of NDE's look quite different. That is not to say that the Buddhists are right and everyone else is wrong. It is more to say that there is a different lens that gives a very different interpretation of NDE's.

There are many experiences that are common in NDE's:

- An awareness of being dead.
- A feeling of peace and quiet.
- An out-of-body experience.
- Entering the tunnel.
- Immersion in a powerful light.
- An intense feeling of unconditional love and acceptance.
- Meeting others.
- Receiving a life review, "seeing one's life flash before one's eyes."
- Approaching a border, or a decision by oneself or others to return to one's body, often accompanied by a reluctance to return.
- Re-entering the body.

- [Dr. Bill Lansing, "[Near Death Experience General Information](#)", Near Death Experience Research Foundation]

Not all Near Death Experiences are positive. People who have unpleasant Near Death Experiences report "encountering a threatening void or stark limbo or hellish purgatory, sometimes hauntings from one's past. Usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed or repressed guilts, fears, and angers. Many seem to expect punishment after death."

Proof that the brain does not produce Near Death Experiences would not necessarily prove that rebirth is true, but it would rule out annihilationism, which is the position of philosophical materialists.

There are a number of ways in which people try to explain away Near Death Experiences, but already a number of them have been reputed. One of these is oxygen deprivation, but there is now evidence that some people actually have increased levels of oxygen during NDE's, not less, so this argument does not appear to have any weight.

There are other "brain based" explanations for NDE's. But what evidence there is suggests that neurological activity during NDE's ceases. While there are no objective measures like EEGs of brain activity during NDE's, the external symptoms indicate that brainwave activity ceases. These symptoms include no pulse, no respiration, and pupils that are fixed and dilated.

While it may be a subtle point, Buddhists do include God – Brahmā – in their cosmology. But unlike theistic religions, Brahmā did not create the heavens and the Earth, and Brahmā is not all-powerful and all-knowing. Even the Buddha did not claim omniscience. So while people may experience a higher power during NDE's, this higher power may not be quite what they presume. Brahmā may be, as Buddhism suggests, a very powerful being, but not an all-powerful being.

For someone who experiences the magnitude of infinite space and infinite consciousness during an NDE, this must be a very powerful moment. This may lead them to exaggerate what they experience, and perhaps to read too much into it. But for advanced meditators who know and understand the formless attainments, it simply fits into a model with which they are already familiar.

In the Buddhist world we also have the description of the death and rebirth process from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Anyone who is familiar with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Near Death Experiences is on familiar ground.

# The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Speaking of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I am going to include it here as evidence because for people who practice this type of Buddhism, the *Book of the Dead* represents a mind science. The *Book of the Dead* reputedly describes what extremely advanced meditators were able to see about the death experience:

*This model of the death process has been found by generations of yogis and yoginis – male and female practitioners of Buddhist yoga, the linking of one’s life energies to one’s knowledge and understanding – to be extremely useful in developing understanding and control of the death transition.*

- [Robert Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*]

As previously noted, technically the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is called the *Bardo Thodol*. “Bardo” means “in-between state.” “Bardo Thodol” means “liberation through hearing during the in-between state.”

The idea is that when a human being dies, it can be a particular auspicious time in which to attain awakening. The consciousness is very fragile during this time, which is why Buddhists traditionally want a very peaceful setting during the death process. This can last up to three days. This is also why being in a hospital where they are taking extreme measures to keep you alive, and there is a lot of commotion, angst, and highly charged emotions is a Buddhist worst-case death scenario.

But that same fragility can put the being into a highly receptive state as well. And if that state is skillfully managed the being can attain awakening. Part of that skillful management is knowing what is going to happen, so that as the being goes through the death process it will be familiar and they will not fear it. Fear is a great enemy during this time.

You want to be in control and not let some of the darker experiences cast you forward into another risky rebirth.

The *Bardo Thodol* describes the process whereby the energy centers in the body unravel one by one. These correspond to the chakras. The dissolution of the body happens in a systematic and orderly way. Presumably one who is properly trained can simply watch this process unfold.

The death process in the *Bardo Thodol* is similar to the Near Death Experience, starting with the clear light. This is the “Chikhai Bardo,” the bardo of Primordial Clear Light. This is a particularly critical stage in the death process, and if it is used properly the being can break from the rounds of rebirth:

*It is, therefore, necessary for the individual entering the Chikhai Bardo to be cleared of karmic debts to be able to withstand the overpowering force encountered during this state. If one is able to reach this state, by means of spiritual practice right now as a human, the cycle of rebirth is ended and one immediately attains liberation.*

- [Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia, “[Chikhai Bardo: The Primordial \(Clear Light\) and the Awareness-Body](#)”]

This is an interesting assertion. The mind must be “cleared of karmic debt.” One way this happens is through the cultivation and practice of generosity and virtue. You can’t be feeling guilty when you die or all bets are off. But a virtuous person who has trained the mind has an opportunity for liberation at this time.

The next stage is the “Chonyid Bardo,” the vision of the Wrathful Deities. The Wrathful Deities are archetypal images from your own mind. They are your negative karma. There is still an opportunity to escape rebirth, but as you might imagine this requires a very strong, equanimous mind:



*If you are able to recognize the deities by name and see through them as mere illusions, they instantly lose their power over your consciousness and you achieve liberation.*

*However, any kind of reaction to them that is caused by fear brings you one step closer to rebirth. The effect of the images becomes even stronger if the awareness-body tries to evade or reject them. This simply means that the only way to gain power over these entities is by accepting them as aspects of your own consciousness; avoiding them only makes them more powerful.*

- [Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia, "[Chonyid Bardo: The Vision Of The Wrathful Deities](#)"]





*Figure: Wrathful Deity*

This bardo corresponds to the reports of distressing Near Death Experiences.

If you fail to free yourself from the rounds of rebirth in the first two bardos, you enter the final stage. This is the “Sidpa Bardo,” the Bardo of Rebirth. The being travels through the realms of existence, and takes root according to the karma that is manifesting at the moment:

*...because of the influence of karma, one will have the impression that one is either ascending, or moving along on a level, or going downwards. Those who carried too much negative karma will have the impression of fleeing into places of misery. Those who acquired good karma will have the impression of arriving in places of happiness.*

- [Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia, “[Sidpa Bardo: The Six Realms of Existence & The Place of Rebirth](#)”]

So that in very brief terms is how the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the death and rebirth process.

There are also less elaborate descriptions of the death and rebirth process. Thānissaro Bhikkhu describes the process of death and rebirth in this way. When you die, “these worlds [realms of the cosmology] will appear to you at that point. You’re in the body and you realize that you cannot stay in the body anymore, and these visions will appear to you. And they will either be memories of things you did in the past or potential places where you could go... you see these options appearing. That’s where the choice would be. Your karma will determine what sorts of options appear to you at that point. This is why they tell people who are with people who are dying to put their minds on something positive, like generosity that they’ve done in the past or when they have been virtuous in the past so that these things start coming to them and they

remember them.”

So you may either remember things from the past, or, if you can work past those, start iterating through the various realms. You can imagine that someone for whom bad karma is manifesting, like a Nazi, they will be stuck in their past memories and be reborn in an undesirable realm. Otherwise you will be reborn in whatever realm you choose, one with which you have an affinity.

If, however, you can manage to keep saying, “no, no, no...” to each subsequently higher realm, and then you are able to let go of any sense of self, you may be able to free yourself from the rounds of rebirth and enter the realm of the unconditioned. This is not entirely inconsistent with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, at least in the general understanding and approach.

You can make of this what you will. We live in a society that values science and rational thinking. But the more time goes by the more those models seem to be failing. Look at what we now know about quantum mechanics (which even Einstein refused to accept), chaos theory, and so forth. More and more it looks like a Buddhist universe, one where process and consciousness rule the day.

The *Bardo Thodol* uses cultural references that can make it difficult to understand outside of a Tibetan context. But you can look through those cultural layers and see a more general possibility. I think that anyone who is an accomplished meditator experiences the chakras, so the idea that the mind-body complex unravels in a systematic way, going through the chakras one at a time makes perfect sense.

We know from NDE experiences about the clear light, and any being who has a clear conscience from a life of virtue, and a strong equanimous mind certainly could be capable of attaining liberation at this point. One of the ways in which the Mahāyāna describes the unconditioned is as an energy that permeates the whole of existence. If this is true, then the clear light could be that energy, and as long as you have a clear conscience and

are fearless and open to the light, you could enter the energy at that time.

The second bardo is simply negative karma. In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* it gets cloaked as deities, and this can be a little difficult for non-Tibetans. But even they say the deities are archetypes. It is your own mind that is conjuring them up. As we all know – I think – our minds are capable of manifesting some pretty fearsome states. This is all your karmic baggage. It is an inventory of every unskillful thing you have done. Depending on the person, that can be quite a list. But even then the Bardo Thodol says that if you can face these demons without fear, it is an opportunity to be free from them.

This is reminiscent of the legendary tale of the night of the Buddha's awakening, in one of the iconic stories from the Buddhist tradition.

In the account from the *Lalitavistara*, Māra the Tempter attacked the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He brought to bear a fearsome army:

*Māra gathered all four divisions of his great and powerful army. It was a terrifying army, so brave in battle that it would make anyone's hair stand on end. Such an army had never been seen before, or even heard of, in the realms of gods and humans...*

*Some had their heads, hands, or feet turned backward, or their eyes facing backward. Their heads, eyes, and faces were ablaze. Their bellies, hands, and feet were deformed, and their faces brimmed with vehement ardor. Their mouths, with protruding ugly fangs, appeared contorted in the extreme, and their thick and broad tongues, rough like a turtle's neck or a straw mat, dangled from their mouths.*

- [Lalitavistara Sutta]

Anyone who has sat long hours on a meditation retreat will no doubt recognize Māra's army. But the army failed to perturb the Buddha.

Next Māra attacked the Buddha with doubt. He challenged the Buddha's right to assume the throne of enlightenment. He shouted at the Buddha, "On what grounds could you ever attain liberation?!" Māra spoke of witnesses to his own generosity, and said that because there were many witnesses to those acts he had a greater right to the throne than the Buddha. He said to the Buddha, "Who bears witness to *your* acts?"

At this point the Buddha simply replied, "The Earth is my witness," and he touched the ground.

Overcoming fear is one of the great challenges of existence, whether it is in life, on the meditation cushion, or while traveling through the bardos of death.

# 4. Is Belief in Rebirth Necessary for Awakening?

## Consequences Beyond This Life

While this first topic does not directly address the question of whether believing in rebirth is required for awakening, it is still an important factor in creating a sense of urgency about the practice.

A couple of my past meditation teachers argued that even if you believe in annihilationism, there is still a compelling case for right action. While it is not your future that is directly affected, it is the future of those around you and generations to come. And there is some truth to that. Native Americans are particularly connected to their ancestors and future generations. This is codified in the Seven Generations principle in the Iroquois Nation constitution:

*In all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion. Cast not over your shoulder behind you the warnings of the nephews and nieces should they chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law which is just and right. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the past and present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.*

- ["Constitution of the Iroquois Nations: The Great Binding Law"]

However, this cultural phenomenon is not very strong in Western society in general. It is true for some people, to be sure. I know many of them. But as a general case this is not how most Westerners think.

Understanding the truth of rebirth puts the practice into a larger context. This is why the Buddha taught the “Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection,” that when we die all we take with us is the consequences of our actions.

The difference between the annihilationist point of view and the rebirth view is like the difference between driving down an empty street and driving down one where there is a police car. In the first case driving responsibly and within the speed limit is optional; in the second case it is required. Look at the language the Buddha used to describe our existence:

*“Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while transmigrating and wandering this long, long time - crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing - are greater than the water in the four great oceans.*

*“Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter... loss with regard to relatives... loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while transmigrating and wandering this long, long time - crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing - are greater than the water in the four great oceans.*

*“Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating and wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries - enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” - [SN 15.3]*

The Buddha considered this issue so vital that he even taught that if you do not believe in rebirth, it is still your best bet to assume that it is true. There is no downside to believing in rebirth, but if rebirth is a reality then you can save yourself a lot of grief. This is what he said to the Kalamas in one of his more famous discourses:

*“If there is a world after death, if there is the fruit of actions rightly and wrongly done, then this is the basis by which, with the breakup of the body, after death, I will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world.’ This is the first assurance one acquires.*

*“But if there is no world after death, if there is no fruit of actions rightly and wrongly done, then here in the present life I look after myself with ease — free from hostility, free from ill will, free from trouble.’ This is the second assurance one acquires.*

*“If evil is done through acting, still I have willed no evil for anyone. Having done no evil action, from where will suffering touch me?’ This is the third assurance one acquires.*

*“But if no evil is done through acting, then I can assume*

*myself pure in both respects.’ This is the fourth assurance one acquires.” - [AN 3:65]*

Note that he was speaking here to lay people. This argument would not have been necessary if he was speaking to monastics.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu further argues that to excise the teachings on rebirth is to keep the Buddha’s teachings from fulfilling their purpose:

*To see experience in terms of dependent co-arising means identifying the mental events and choices that lead to rebirth and other forms of suffering, and developing the knowledge that can put them to an end. In other words, part of the practice even today lies in confirming that the Buddha was right about the connection between karma and rebirth, and that his rightness was timeless: These teachings are integral to the four noble truths, and in particular to the path of practice leading to the end of suffering. To discard these teachings won’t help Buddhism to advance. It will prevent the teachings from fulfilling their purpose.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Truth of Rebirth: And Why It Matters for Buddhist Practice*]

In summary, I think it is best to heed the advice of the Buddha in his address to the Kalamas. There are no drawbacks to accepting the doctrine of rebirth, but there may be serious consequences to rejecting it.

## **The Buddha Only Taught What Was Beneficial**

The Buddha famously taught only what was necessary for awakening. So when he taught something it was because he felt that it was necessary in



following the path:

*“Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have left it undeclared.” - [MN 63.8]*

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*...the fact that his awakening included knowledge about rebirth doesn't fully explain why, when he began teaching, he addressed the topic. After all, on his own testimony, there were many other things he learned in the course of his awakening that he didn't see fit to include in his teaching because they weren't conducive in leading his listeners to their own release. He limited himself to teaching the four noble truths because “they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding” (SN 56:31).*

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Truth of Rebirth: And Why It Matters for Buddhist Practice*]

The Buddha's teachings are usually called a path, but they can also be called a training. Meditation is a skill. Living in accord with the Dharma is a skill. It is like learning a craft or a trade.

This is why the notion of “Buddhist philosophy” is rather curious. Of course, there is an understanding that underlies what the Buddha taught. There are the Four Noble Truths, dependent co-arising, the Three Characteristics, and so forth. But these do not represent a philosophy. They are what the Buddha saw when he awakened and opened to the

transcendent, universal nature of existence.

This is not a Buddhist chauvinism, a way to say “my religion is better than your religion.” For one thing, the Buddha’s teachings are all about love, compassion, and wisdom. It isn’t much of a stretch to get to tolerance and good will. In Buddhism, the perfect is never the enemy to the good. You cultivate whatever is beneficial. The Buddha himself always encouraged his lay supporters to continue to support other sects if they had done so in the past. In modern times the Dalai Lama encourages people to find their path through whatever tradition they come from, not necessarily to become Buddhists.

The transcendent part of the Buddhist path is for people who choose it. There is no point to sending armies throughout the world to force it down peoples’ throats. How would that even be possible? This path requires a great commitment. It is not something you can impose on someone.

Having said that, the teaching on rebirth is a part of the transcendent part of the path. As we have seen, the Buddha taught rebirth over and over and over again. And because he only taught what is necessary to attain awakening, it is a topic that the serious student must embrace at some point. It is necessary to attain awakening.

## **Elimination of Doubt**

Finally we come to the issue of doubt. Doubt for me is the smoking gun when it comes to seeing the relationship between rebirth and awakening.

Doubt shows up in many contexts in the Buddha’s teaching. It is one of the Five Hindrances to meditation. If you have doubt in the Buddha’s teachings, or you have doubt in your ability to put them into practice, that is going to be a problem.

Of course, as discussed in other contexts, this is not blind faith. It starts out more or less that way, because when you first start to meditate you

do not know if it will be of benefit to you. But the Buddhist path is always about experiencing it for yourself.

When I was in junior high school my gym teacher taught a unit on tennis. I had never played tennis, and he started by teaching us the rules, and then he taught us how to serve, hit a backhand, hit a forehand, and so forth. Until I was able to do these things for myself all I had was his word for it, that if I followed his instructions I could do these things. But much to my amazement, when I did what he told us to do, I was able to serve, hit a backhand, and hit a forehand. And once I did that, I was able to confirm that what he told us was true. I have not played tennis since, but I still remember what it was like to go from knowing nothing to attaining modest competence in a short period of time.

That is this training. And if you follow the instructions and put them into practice, you will become an arahant and see what the Buddha saw, the transcendent, universal nature of reality. It is a repeatable experiment.

According to the formula for stream-entry that uses the fetters, you must eliminate doubt in the Buddha's teachings. This would include seeing into the truth of rebirth.

It is important to emphasize that this is not just accepting rebirth on an intellectual level, although that is a start. This would be true for all the Buddha's teachings. The elimination of doubt is seeing for yourself that what the Buddha taught is true.

Until stream-entry I think it would be normal to have some lingering doubt. It may be quite subtle or it may be a big problem. And again, this is not about taking an oath or swearing allegiance or anything like that. It is about cultivating the path so the seeing comes to fruition on its own. You cultivate generosity, virtue, and concentration, and these are the tools whereby wisdom and discernment grow.

Because it is clear that the Buddha taught rebirth, and that he only taught what is necessary to attain awakening, and that in order to attain stream-entry you must eliminate the fetter of doubt, seeing into the truth of

rebirth is a necessary part of the process.

*So we're faced with a choice. If we're sincere about wanting to end suffering and to give the Buddha's teachings a fair test, then — instead of assuming that he was a prisoner of his own time and place, unable to question his cultural assumptions — we have to examine the extent to which, in adhering to our own cultural assumptions, we're imprisoning ourselves. If we don't want to drop our self-imposed restrictions, we can still benefit from any of the Buddha's teachings that fit within those limitations, but we'll have to accept the consequences: that the results we'll get will be limited as well. Only if we're willing to submit to the test of appropriate attention, abandoning the presuppositions that distort our thinking about issues like karma and rebirth, will we be able to make full use of the Canon's tools for gaining total release.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Truth of Rebirth: And Why It Matters for Buddhist Practice*]

# 5. The Buddhist Cosmology

*“But how is it, Master Gotama, are there gods?”*

*“It is known to me to be the case, Bhāradvāja, that there are gods.” - [MN 100.42]*

When you hang around the Buddhist world long enough, particularly the monastic world where people do lots and lots of intensive meditation, you will hear stories about experiences in other realms. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu tells a story about a monk who saw into his previous six lives one night. It's not the extensive experience of the Buddha, but it is hovering around the same territory.

We live in a vast and complex universe, and even the physical sciences are saying that we can't see most of it:

*All the stars, planets and galaxies that can be seen today make up just 4 percent of the universe. The other 96 percent is made of stuff astronomers can't see, detect or even comprehend.*

*These mysterious substances are called dark energy and dark matter. Astronomers infer their existence based on their gravitational influence on what little bits of the universe can be seen, but dark matter and energy themselves continue to elude all detection.*

*“The overwhelming majority of the universe is: who knows?” explains science writer Richard Panek, who spoke about these oddities of our universe on Monday (May 9) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) here in Manhattan. “It's unknown for*

*now, and possibly forever."*

- [Richard Panek, *The 4 Percent Universe*]

I heard a monk once say that the different realms exist in the same physical space, just at different vibrational frequencies. This is why some people can see ghosts, because ghosts live at a vibrational frequency that is close to the human realm. Some people also see "devas" - sort of lower level gods - for the same reason. And we know that most of the seeable physical universe is empty space. If you could look at your body through a powerful enough microscope, most of what you would see is empty space punctuated with an occasional tiny particle.

I know a meditation teacher who was in Thailand with a friend at the 10th anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death. Ajahn Chah is a revered forest Ajahn (*teacher*) in the Thai forest tradition. This friend was taking pictures with her camera phone, but none of them came out properly. Even though it was a crystal-clear day, they had these smudges on them, like raindrops. She tried everything to get a clear picture, but nothing worked. Finally she showed the pictures to one of the monks who said, "Oh, those are the devas."



*Figure: Devas at Ajahn Chah's Death Commemoration*

These are the types of stories you will hear from people in the Buddhist world. But these types of experiences are not restricted to Buddhism. People from all types of backgrounds and religions have similar stories. Unfortunately our gravitation to an overly rationalistic view of life often prevents us from seeing past the limits of materialistic thinking.

That brings us to the two most common views of the Buddhist cosmology, how Buddhism understands the realms of existence.

A few years ago I heard a talk by Bhikkhu Bodhi on the Buddhist cosmology, and midway through it someone asked him - rather incredulously - "Do you think this is true?" His response was, "I think something like this is true." That is the way to think of it. It is not necessarily literal fact, but "something like this is true."

There are two ways in which the Buddhist cosmology is expressed. One of them is a simpler one and can be thought of as a general classification. The other one is more complicated and fits into the framework of the first one.

Generally speaking, Buddhism recognizes six realms. Three of these are higher rebirths, and three of them are lower rebirths:

1. The god realm, heavenly realm.
2. The human realm.
3. The realm of the asuras, demi-gods, or titans.
4. The realm of hungry ghosts or spirits.
5. The animal realm.
6. The hell realm.

Often in the Buddhist world when people describe the different realms this is the system they use.

So this is the basic method of categorization.

The more complicated cosmology seems to have evolved over time. The Pāli Canon does not give a complete description of it anywhere. It was formalized in the centuries after the Buddha's death. He never gave a discourse on the topic. However, many of the realms described here show up in his discourses. The rest of them come from later works like the *Abhidharma* and the *Visuddhimagga*.

However, there are suttas that describe parts of this cosmology. Here is a passage from the "Kevaddha Sutta: About Kevaddha - What Brahmā Didn't Know" [DN 11]:

*"...Once, Kevaddha, in this order of monks the thought occurred to a certain monk: 'I wonder where the four great elements - the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the air element - cease without remainder.' And that monk attained to such a state of mental concentration that the way to the deva-realms appeared before him.*

*"Then, coming to the Realm of the devas of the Four Great Kings, he asked those devas: 'Friends, where do*



*the four great elements -- earth, water, fire and air - cease without remainder?’ At this question the devas of the Four Great Kings said to him: ‘Monk, we don’t know where the four great elements cease without remainder. But the Four Great Kings are loftier and wiser than we are. They may know where the four great elements cease...’*

*“So that monk went to the Four Great Kings and asked the same question, but they replied: ‘We don’t know, but the Thirty-Three Gods may know...’*

*“So that monk went to the Thirty-Three Gods, who said: ‘We don’t know, but Sakka, lord of the gods, may know...’*

*“Sakka, lord of the gods, said: ‘The Yāma devas may know...’*

*“The Yāma devas said: ‘Suyāma, son of the devas, may know...’*

*“Suyāma said: ‘The Tusita devas may know...’*

*“The Tusita devas said: ‘Santusita, son of the devas, may know...’*

*“Santusita said: ‘The Nimmanarati devas may know...’*

*“The Nimmanarati devas said: ‘Sunimitta, son of the devas, may know...’*

*“Sunimitta said: ‘The Paranimmita-Vasavatti devas may know...’*

*“The Paranimmita-Vasavatti devas said: ‘Vasavatti, son of*

*the devas, may know...'*

*"Vasavatti said: 'The devas of Brahmā's retinue may know...'*

*"Then that monk, by the appropriate concentration, made the way to the Brahmā world appear before him. He went to the devas of Brahmā's retinue and asked them. They said: 'We don't know. But there is Brahmā, Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. He is loftier and wiser than we are. He would know where the four great elements cease without remainder.'" - [DN 11.67-80]*

(He didn't know.)

Here the Buddha walks us through the heavenly realms up to and including the Brahmā realm, "Brahmā" being the supreme god.

(There are eight discourses in the Majjhima Nikāya that mention the Buddhist cosmology, five in the Digha Nikāya, etc., so this cosmological reference is not the only one.)

The final cosmology is a little suspicious because there are 31 realms plus the unconditioned realm, making 32, and 32 is a sort of magic number in ancient India. For example, they believed that a "great man" would have 32 marks. So the inference is that the cosmology was modified to fit that number. However, as Bhikkhu Bodhi states, it is probably something like this.

Practically, the most important point is that we live in these realms, being born and reborn and reborn, over and over again. Each time we are reborn according to our karma, and more precisely the karma that manifests at the time of rebirth. Thus, as already noted, karma is not

deterministic, but probabilistic. Having a lot of good karma improves the odds, but it is no guarantee.

Further, even a good rebirth has its dangers. Beings in the heavenly realms are prone to conceit and arrogance, feelings of superiority over other beings, and this leads to lower rebirths. It is the inevitable fall from grace. We move up and down through the realms like moving through the floors of a building. The upper floors are happy rebirths, and the floors below ground are unhappy rebirths.

What makes this so fundamental to the Buddha's teachings is that we are playing a very dangerous game of roulette. At stake is infinite rebirths up and down this cosmic building. Inevitably we are reborn into undesirable realms. Even the human realm - which is relatively positive - is, well, look around you. Turn on the news. It's not so great.

So while good karma and a good rebirth are certainly better than bad karma and a bad rebirth, the only way out is to attain an awakening. It is the only way to free yourself from being thrashed about somewhat randomly, deposited here and there through infinite time, which is what has happened to us so far.

This understanding also should increase compassion for others and decrease our own arrogance. We have been in all the realms an infinite number of times. Everyone you see who is poor, starving, sick, a murderer, a drug addict, ruthless, mean, whatever it might be, we have all been there, we have all been that person. As the Christians say, "There but for the grace of God go I." And without attaining an awakening you will be right back there some day. Maybe you are there now.

There are those who criticize Buddhism as being self-centered, of only seeking individual happiness and liberation. However, as the Buddha said, the best way to practice is for ourselves and others. And the more skillful your practice becomes, the more benefit you are to the people around you. It is not possible to do this practice properly and not be of benefit. We do a lot of mischief because of our ignorance. Our speech and

our thoughts and our actions cause a great deal of harm.

I heard Ayya Khema make an interesting comment once. Ayya Khema, I believe most people think, was an arahant. She died in 1997. Her comment was that when you become an arahant, after your physical death - “parinibbāna,” in Buddhist terms - you become part of the fabric of the universe in a way that contributes to the greater good of all beings. Your arahantship lifts everyone up throughout all time and space. This is very similar to the way in which Mahāyāna Buddhists talk about nirvāṇa. Is this the Primordial Light? Perhaps.

I certainly would have no way of knowing if this is true, but if it is, it demonstrates the supreme importance of awakening. The Mahāyāna Buddhists - to their credit - emphasize full awakening only after all beings are free. This is (I am guessing) because in the 1st millennium in India, when it was a Buddhist country, there were probably plenty of selfish monks and nuns, and the Mahāyāna Buddhists wanted to emphasize altruism, and to make that a centerpiece of their practice.

But you will not find this in the Buddha’s teachings. And you can certainly speculate that what Ayya Khema intimates is true. The Buddha was someone in whom extreme, pure altruism manifested. He was incapable of teaching a path that was not for the benefit of all beings.

As described, the Buddha famously only taught what is necessary to attain an awakening. He refused to answer certain questions, such as whether or not the self exists, because they were of no benefit. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya there is what is probably his most famous declaration on this subject. The name of the sutta is “The Siṃsapā Grove,” but it is also commonly called “A Handful of Leaves”:

*On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī in a siṃsapā grove. Then the Blessed One took up a few siṃsapā leaves in his hand and addressed the bhikkhus thus: “What do you think, bhikkhus, which is more numerous: these few siṃsapā leaves that I have*

*taken up in my hand or those in the siṃsapā grove overhead?"*

*"Venerable sir, the siṃsapā leaves that the Blessed One has taken up in his hand are few, but those in the siṃsapā grove overhead are numerous."*

*"So too, bhikkhus, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, bhikkhus, have I not taught those many things? Because they are unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. Therefore I have not taught them." - [SN 56.31]*

The Buddha was not hiding anything from us. There is no double secret probation in the Buddha's teachings. There is no punch line that you have to figure out for yourself. The Buddha fixated on one thing, and that was showing us the way out.

I heard this story on The West Wing years ago. A man falls into a manhole. Whenever he sees someone walk by, he calls for help. Finally someone stops, looks down into the hole, and jumps in. "What did you do that for?" the man asks. "Now we are both stuck down here!" "Yes," said the other man, "But I have been down here, and I know the way out."

It does take faith to do this practice. A lot of people don't want to hear that. But it isn't blind faith. With experience, you develop "confirmed confidence" (Pāli: aveccappasāda). You see it for yourself. But the unconditioned realm is not describable in conventional terms of time and space. When you become a stream-enterer, then you see what the Buddha says is true. But along the way, as you see the teachings

manifest, as you see yourself becoming happier and more skillful, your confidence grows.

## The Realms of Existence

The Buddhist cosmology as pieced together from various sources is shown in the following table.

World	Realm	Notes	Lifespan
Formless world ("arūpa-loka")	Neither perception nor non-perception	Equivalent to the immaterial jhānas	84,000 aeons
	Nothingness		60,000 aeons
	Infinite consciousness		40,000 aeons
	Infinite space		20,000 aeons
Fine material world ("rūpa-loka")	The Supreme/peerless	Place of rebirth for non-returners	16,000 aeons
	The Clear-sighted		8,000 aeons
	The Lovely/beautiful		4,000 aeons
	The Serene/untroubled		2,000 aeons
	The Durable/"not falling away"		1,000 aeons
	The Unconscious	Body only, no mind	500 aeons
	Great reward/very fruitful	fourth jhāna	500 aeons
	Refulgent glory/complete beauty	third jhāna	65 aeons
	Boundless beauty		32 aeons
	limited beauty		16 aeons
	Streaming radiance	second jhāna	8 aeons
	Boundless radiance		4 aeons
	Limited radiance		2 aeons
	Great Brahmā	first jhāna	1 aeons
Brahmā's ministers	1/2 aeons		
Brahmā's retinue	1/3 aeons		
Sense-desire world ("kamā-loka")	Masters of the creation of others	devas	16,000 celestial years
	Those who delight in creation		8,000 celestial years
	The contented		4,000 celestial years
	The Yama gods		2,000 celestial years
	The thirty-three gods		1,000 celestial years
	The four great kings		500 celestial years
	Human	you are here	not fixed
	Jealous gods	states of misery	
	Hungry ghosts		
	animals		
	hell		

Figure: Realms in the Buddhist Cosmology

So here is the nickel tour.

The word "aeon" is the English translation of the Sanskrit word "kalpa" (Pāli: kappa). In both Hinduism and Buddhism, a kalpa is a life of the

universe, i.e., the time between the creation and recreation of a universe. Note that Western scientists only started to believe in a cyclical model of the universe in the 1980's.

A "celestial year" is "360 celestial days." A celestial day equals 50 human years in the lowest heaven ("the four great kings") and doubles with each level. In other words, it's a long time.

So starting from the top down, if - when you die - you have mastered the eighth jhāna, "the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception," you will be reborn into the highest formless world, and be there for 84,000 aeons. And so on down the line to the heavenly realm of "Brahmā's retinue," which is the lowest heavenly realm that corresponds to a mastery of jhāna. Thus there is a mapping between the human mind and human consciousness and the highest 20 heavenly realms.

Just below that are the six heavenly realms of the "devas." Devas are "lower-level gods," similar to humans, but happier, longer-lived, and more powerful. Because devas are close to human beings in the hierarchy, there are people who can see them. Bhikkhu Bodhi says that at the monastery in Sri Lanka where he was, there was a valley next to the monastery where lots of devas lived, and some of the monks could see them. Tradition also holds that devas know where they are not welcome, or where human beings are not well-behaved, so it is unlikely that devas live in places that lack compassion and kindness. They're not hanging around Walmart, Trump Towers, or hedge fund managers.

Going below the human realm, you can see the places where you don't want to go. These realms also map to human consciousness. Hell maps to anger in human consciousness. You probably know people who are angry all the time. This is the hell realm manifesting in a human life. The amount of time someone spends in a hell realm depends on their karma. A basically good person who has some bad karma manifesting may be there for a brief time. Someone who is especially cruel will be there for a very long time, perhaps aeons. (Think "Nazis.")

There are those who believe that Christians got their notion of hell from Buddhism. You may have heard that in Jesus' lost "40 days in the desert" that he went to India where Buddhism influenced him. Buddhism was in its hey-day in India at that time, pre-dating Jesus' life by about 400 years. Many early Christians, including St. Augustine, believed in reincarnation.

The primary characteristic of the animal realm is that animals only behave according to their nature. Lions are lions and monkeys are monkeys, alligators are alligators. You also see this at play in the human world where some people do not exercise any filters or judgment in their behavior. One of the qualities that we cultivate in our practice is the ability to exercise choice, not to be victims of our thoughts and emotions.

Hungry ghosts (Pāli: peta) have unquenchable desire. They are usually depicted with huge stomachs and very small throats; their hunger is never satisfied. This is a metaphor for all types of desire. You may know people like this; no matter how much they have, it is never enough. People like this are never happy; they are never contented. They are hungry ghosts living in the human realm, and they may be reborn in the hungry ghost realm.





Figure: Hungry ghosts

Hungry ghosts play an important part in the Buddha's teaching. The foundation of the path is generosity. Generosity is the feeling that you have more than enough, so much so that you can give some away. All of our conditioned experience - the prison of saṃsara in which we find ourselves - is because we are constantly feeding, wanting, craving and clinging, and generosity is the antidote for that.

*The jealous gods (Pāli: asura) are self-absorbed, egotistical, violent, angry with everyone, always looking for a fight. They are addicted to their passions. The Zen*

*patriarch Zhiyi says this about the asuras: "Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith - this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asuras."*

- [Wikipedia]

They are the bullies of the cosmos.

# 6. Psychic Events

I want to take some time to talk about what I call “psychic events.” I put these into five categories: unexplainable predispositions, unexplainable phobias, déjà vu, warning dreams, and experiences in non-human realms.

OK. This probably sounds like a trip into spiritual fantasy camp. But the reason that I want to talk about these experiences is because a) I think they are very common and b) I want to try and put them into a proper context.

I have been going to meditation retreats and reading books about Buddhism for over a quarter of a century. And despite the fact that Buddhism is a form of mysticism, it was only a couple of months ago that I heard these types of events even discussed. Two things struck me about that discussion. The first is that I found it very comforting because I have had all of these experiences, but a part of me always thought, well, am I crazy? Yet here they were, all being discussed and defined in a way that matched my experience precisely.

The other thing that struck me is that even though these are well-known and accepted in Buddhist countries, they are hardly discussed here. And I felt, well, cheated. Teachers are supposed to teach. They are supposed to know. They are not supposed to run away from the truth.

So I won't, either. And if all of this is a bit much for you, as always, don't worry about it. Don't make it into a problem. You don't have to believe any of this. But for people who, like me, have had these experiences, or for people who want to simply know more, this section is for you.

## Predispositions

My mother was born into a very poor family of Pennsylvania Germans.

They emigrated to the United States in 1754, and lived for the most part in the same area of Pennsylvania right up until I was born. Most of them still live there.

Education was a rarity in that culture. Most of the men dropped out of school when they were 13 or 14 to work. The women were often married by the time they were 16 years old. There was very little in the way of art, music, or culture.

And yet, at a young age my mother felt compelled to learn how to play the piano. There was no particular impetus for this, but she had a very strong compulsion. And in fact, she not only learned how to play the piano, she became a church organist. At the very end of her life, when she could barely move and her memory was failing, she could still sit down at the piano and crank out a pretty rambunctious Rachmaninov. The transformation from failing little old lady to passionate pianist was startling.

When my mother was in her 40's she went to see a psychic. The psychic told her that in the 19th century, she had been a pianist.

I saw the same thing happen to my daughter. When she was in the fourth grade, suddenly she had to learn to play the violin. It could not be any other instrument, and she was quite insistent. Once again, there was no particular impetus for this. I don't think, in fact, that she had even seen someone play the violin. But she did take it up, and for many years hardly a day went by when she did not play. When she was in college, she spent a year in Chile. When she went there, she did not take her violin with her. But after a couple of weeks, she missed it so much that she rented one.

You have probably seen this happen in families. One of the children is an outlier. They have some strong interest or predisposition that cannot be explained by genetics, or family or cultural influence.

My own story is that when I was in my mid-teens, I suddenly felt this strong connection to the sea. Now, I had only seen the ocean once. But I

felt this compulsion. In particular it was a connection to 19th century ships. I started reading everything I could. I was especially compelled by The Bounty Trilogy.

Curiously, the next time I saw the ocean, I had a feeling of fear and dread. I had these conflicting feelings of being drawn to the sea and yet being dreadfully afraid of it. I occasionally had memories of having been at sea, and I also came to believe that I had died at sea.

These days many people like to draw a link between genetics and our tendencies. But those who study such things say that genetics is highly over-rated, even in such “obvious” things as health. I used to work with a very prominent doctor who said that about 2 1/2% of all diseases are genetically related, so that is a very small number.

Admittedly this is all anecdotal. But I am guessing that if you look at the families around you, you know at least one person who is an outlier.

## **Phobias**

There are many papers about phobias that come from previous lives. I have talked to many people about this topic, and it is amazing to me how many people have phobias that they cannot explain. There is no event in this lifetime that explains the phobia. But the phobias are real and extremely powerful.

In one of his papers, Dr. Stevenson wrote this:

*As long ago as the 1890s Hall (1897) noted that the fears of infancy and childhood were often focused on dangers that, although prevalent during former centuries, no longer presented any important threat: thunderstorms, snakes, drowning, nighttime. Hall commented about such fears that:*

*“their relative intensity fits past conditions far better*

*than it does present ones. Night is now the safest time, serpents are no longer among our most fatal foes... The weather fears and the incessant talk about weather... fits [sic] a condition of life in trees, caves or tents, or at least of far greater exposure... than present houses, carriages, and even dress afford... The first experiences with water, the moderate noise of the wind, or distant thunder, etc., might excite faint fear, but why does it sometimes make children on the instant frantic with panic?"*

- [Stevenson, Ian, "[Phobias in Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives](#)", Journal of Scientific Exploration. Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 243-254, 1990]

There are psychologists and hypnotherapists who have been able to successfully use past life regression to treat cases where phobias are from a previous life. Dr. Brian Weiss, a Yale medical school trained psychiatrist, has written a book about his such experiences. As you might suspect, given his background, he first came to this topic as something of a skeptic. Then he met "Catherine," a woman who had phobias that defied his usual methods to treat her:

*...Then I met Catherine. For 18 months I used conventional methods of therapy to help her overcome her symptoms. When nothing seemed to work, I tried hypnosis. In a series of trance states, Catherine recalled "past-life" memories that proved to be the causative factors of her symptoms. She also was able to act as a conduit for information from highly evolved "spirit entities," and through them she revealed many of the secrets of life and of death. In just a few short months, her symptoms disappeared, and she resumed her life, happier and more at peace than ever before.*

- [Dr. Brian Weiss, *Many Lives, Many Masters*]

## Déjà vu

*"It's like déjà vu all over again."*

- [Yogi Berra (famous yogi)]

The fact that we even have a word for this type of experience shows how common it is. (OK. Technically it's French. Fill in your favorite joke about the French. And hey, if you're French? *J'adore le français!*) The aforementioned psychiatrist Dr. Brian Weiss says that the first sign that a past life may be at the core of a problem is a feeling of déjà vu:

*For example, a patient of mine began having anxiety attacks while on her honeymoon in Greece. When she and her husband left for Rome, the anxiety attacks completely disappeared. When she saw me as a patient, we did a past life regression and found that she had been killed in ancient Greece. Her anxiety attacks stemmed from that lifetime even though she did not know why at the time.*

- [Podrazik, Joan, "[4 Signs You May Have Had a Previous Life](#)", Huffington Post, Mar 11, 2015]

In their article on reincarnation, Ervin Laszlo and Anthony Peake make this comment:

*Reincarnation stories tend to be clear and distinct in children, whereas in adults they are mostly indistinct, appearing as vague hunches and impressions. The more widespread among them are the déjà vu: recognizing a site or a happening one sees for the first time as familiar. The sensation of déjà connu, encountering a person for*



*the first time with a sense of having known him or her before, also occurs, but less frequently.*

- [Laszlo, E., Peake, A., "[The Evidence for Reincarnation: Scientifically Documented True Stories That Prove Past Lives Are Real](#)", Conscious Lifestyle Magazine, June 2, 2017]

I think that most people have had these experiences. You meet someone with whom you instantly feel comfortable, or alternatively, for whom you take an instant dislike. If you really think about the situation, there is no reason for either response.

Then, as with the bride in Greece, there is a strong reaction to a place. Again, this can be a strong feeling of familiarity or one of revulsion.

Feelings of déjà vu tend to be more nebulous than actually previous life memories. They are just feelings, but often they are very powerful and unexpected.

## **Warning Dreams**

I do not consider myself to be a very psychic person. I know people who are, and I am not one of them. However, I have had these experiences.

The most vivid one that I had and the hardest one to explain away happened to me about eight years ago. I had a dream. In the dream I was at work. I was standing outside of my office. There were two other people there. One of them was a long-time friend of mine with whom I had worked for many years. I did not know the other person. We were discussing an engineering issue, and in that dream the discussion got heated, and the unknown person fired me.

I remembered it the next day. It was particularly vivid. Like many people, I usually do not remember my dreams, or I do not remember them well. But this one was quite clear. I did not have any particular



feeling of dread about the dream. It just seemed like an unpleasant dream. I didn't think about it much, and after a while, I forgot about it.

Two years later I was standing outside my office in that exact same way, having a discussion with two people. One of them was the aforementioned friend. The other one had been hired about eight months beforehand. He was hired to run my department. In the middle of that discussion I realized that this was the dream. It was exactly how I had dreamed it. Because I had had the dream, I was able to diffuse the situation. I was not fired, but I could not work with this guy, and I retired about four months later. The good news is that I was able to leave on my own terms, and no blood was spilled.

The most inexplicable thing about the dream is – obviously – how could I see someone I had not even met before?

This is the third dream of this type that I can remember. The first one was when I was about 26 years old. That dream was unique in that I had this strong feeling that the person giving me the warning was my father. My father had died about eight years before that, about a week before my 18th birthday.

I did what I think most people do, and that is to push these experiences away, to treat them as curiously implausible. And I did not have a context for them.

Then recently, I went to a retreat with Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, and he discussed just this phenomenon. They are called “warning dreams.” They are quite well-known in Thailand. Warning dreams come from devas, and they are often a relative from a previous life. This would map to my experience of my father in the warning dream.

I also heard a woman at a retreat say that she had recently gotten a warning dream about an investment. She ignored the dream and lost her money.

# Experiences in Other Realms

There are other instances and types of contact with devas. I have never been able to find a set of compelling stories about these, so here I am flying by the seat of my pants. But I think it is worth mentioning them in case they ever happen to you.

Whether or not you have these experiences depends on your temperament. As I said, I am not a particularly psychic person. But I have a friend who is, and when I mention some of these things to her – usually in wide-eyed amazement – she looks at me like, ho, hum. Of course. What’s the big deal?

Having said that, it doesn’t make you a better person or a better meditator or anything like that if you have these experiences. In fact, they can be a way to get sidetracked.

Ajahn Mun, who founded the Thai Forest Tradition, had an affinity for devas:

*[Ajahn Mun] had a lot of visions in his meditation — many more than his teacher, Ajaan Sao — but he realized it wasn’t that he was somehow a better meditator than Ajaan Sao. It was just that he had this particular temperament and these particular problems. He regarded them as problems, but also as potentials.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “[Recollecting the Devas](#)”, Sep 28, 2009]

Another impression that I get is that encounters with devas tend to be very personal experiences, and sometimes they are quite intimate. As a result, some people who encounter devas are reluctant to talk about them. They may mention that something happened, but not go beyond that:

*Ajaan Fuang was another teacher who tended to have a lot of visions. He told me many times the two main points that Ajaan Mun had told him about visions. One, when you have a vision, it's your private affair. You can talk about it with your teacher but you don't want to go talking about it with other people. Two, you have to analyze it, to see what kind of Dhamma lesson the vision is teaching.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "Recollecting the Devas", Sep 28, 2009]

The first story of this type that I heard was from a monk (second hand) who regularly visited one of the deva realms in his meditation. But he said that they did not like him talking about them, so he respected that. His devas appeared as gnomes. This is one of the forms in which devas are reported to appear.

Some people think that it is only people like the Buddha and Thai Forest Ajahns who have these experiences, but that is not true. In fact, I think these are more common than most people think. As we have seen in the case of warning dreams, these types of encounters are quite common.

The important point is to see what you can learn from them. First, they may not be reliable, so you have to determine that. Then fit them into a bigger space. Devas are just beings. They may be trying to help. If that is the case, then accept what they are trying to teach you. If they are troublesome and playing tricks on you, then account for that as well.

# 7. Implications of the Buddhist Cosmology

There are many implications to looking at existence from the perspective of rebirth and the cosmology. For example, you may find that parts of your temperament are problematic. Whatever quality it is, it may be manifesting as its opposite from a previous life. The Buddhist tradition famously holds that stinginess manifests as poverty, and wealth manifests from generosity.

Another example is that some people, no matter how knowledgeable they are, find that others tend not to find them credible. This is from past karma. People who lied a lot in a previous life will have this quality manifesting.

This is not intended to make us more judgmental. It just puts everything into a bigger space. And remember, it does not imply that someone is inherently superior or inferior, only that a particular type of karma is manifesting.

It also helps us to dis-identify with such traits. If you see such a trait you can be a little more accepting of it. Of course, you want to work with it and cultivate virtue. But if it is a strong part of your temperament, it may not go away.

There is a story about Ajahn Chah and a lay person who had known him for 10 years. One day Ajahn Chah mentioned that he had an inherently angry temperament. The lay person was very surprised, and said that he had never seen Ajahn Chah get angry. Ajahn Chah responded that while the anger arose, "It has nowhere to go." That is a skillful way to cultivate the mind.

Our relationships may also have karmic roots in a previous life. You may

meet people who have strong negative responses to you even though you have done nothing to warrant that. That may be the result of past karma. Or you may find yourself strongly drawn to someone, likewise for no discernible reason. The Buddhist tradition also holds that we are born to our parents because of karmic links. These may be good or bad.

It is important to remember that we don't really know. It may just be indigestion. But it can be helpful to know that when seemingly inexplicable events happen, they may be karmically rooted.

If you have psychic experiences, be wary of them. There are dangers in these experiences. Do not put too much credence in them. I knew a woman once who every time almost anything happened started to speculate on how this must have come from a previous life. You begin to think about previous lives and experiences as deterministic, which if you understand karma, you know they are not. And as the Buddha said, the causes of anything that happens are so vast and complex that if you try and understand them, you will go mad:

*“The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.” - [AN 4.77]*

The most important thing in this practice is to stick to the basics. Cultivate generosity. Cultivate virtue. Cultivate concentration. Study the teachings.

You can get sidetracked by these experiences, especially the more powerful ones like contact with devas. Devas in the lower realms are known to be particularly capricious. They like to play tricks on people. If you have a warning dream, you have to use some judgment. As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says, “If you get a warning dream about a tsunami in Toronto, you might not want to just pack up and move to Saskatoon.”

In Buddhism, these experiences are viewed as something of a carnival sideshow. Some people have them, and some people do not. Even non-

meditators have them, and many advanced meditators do not. If you look up warning dreams on the Internet, most of the time people think they are messages from God or guardian angels. That is another danger in these experiences; you misinterpret them.

Speaking of God, there are many billions of people on the planet. One has to surmise that given the size of the universe, that there are many other planets with living beings. The numbers must be staggering.

In Buddhism, you will sometimes hear the expressions *vertical cosmology* and *horizontal cosmology*. The vertical cosmology is what was previously described. We live in a particular vertical cosmology. It is tied to one world system.

Buddhism also has a horizontal cosmology. This accounts for other world systems. This is called the *sahara* cosmology. Thus, the vertical cosmology is replicated throughout the universe.

It would take a lot of hubris to think that one being created and controls this all, much less that that being cares about our financial investments or the outcome of a football game. But the presence of world systems and many levels of many devas makes the math work a little more plausibly.

Apropos of capricious devas, you may know about a drug called Ayahuasca that shamans in Brazil use. It is a hallucinogen, and people can have what a Buddhist would describe as deva encounters. However, the shamans who administer these drugs are quick to point out that the devas you access using this drug almost never tell you the truth. People come out of these powerful experiences believing things that are basically a big trick. Well, at least we know the devas have a sense of humor.

So those are some of the dangers.

On the other hand, an obvious benefit to these experiences is that they put your life into a much larger context. The Buddha was not kidding when he said that we have been born and reborn infinitely throughout limitless time. I think that one reason that people have trouble accepting

this is that, like the universe, the scale is hard to comprehend.

While experiences with lower level devas are likely to be untrustworthy, those with higher level devas can be incredibly powerful, blissful, loving, and serene. At the beginning of the Buddha's teaching career, he taught the "gradual discourse":

*When Yasa, the noble youth, was sitting near him, the Blessed One preached to him in due course: that is to say, he talked about the merits obtained by 1) alms-giving, about the 2) duties of morality, 3) about heaven, 4) about the evils, the vanity, and the danger of desires, and about 5) the blessings of the abandonment of desire.*  
- [Mv 1.7.5]

Notice the third teaching, that on heaven. Rebirth in heaven is a fruit of virtuous conduct. Beings born there are more ethically evolved than humans. It is a good place to be.

If you have an experience in one of these higher realms, it may also help you to see the dangers in human birth. The human realm is quite a mess. And being trapped in a physical body has all sorts of drawbacks. We spend most of our day taking care of it. It needs sleep. It needs to be fed. It gets sick. It gets old. It dies. Imagine being free from all that.

If you can be reborn in a heaven and continue to practice the Dharma, that is very auspicious, and you won't have to deal with all the calamities of the human realm and all of the calamities associated with a physical body.

In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha not only told us that the cause of our dukkha is craving, he told us that one of the types of craving to which he was referring is craving for existence. The higher fetters include desire for rebirth in the material realm. But an experience with a higher deva realm can help you see the danger in material form and the drawbacks. This certainly puts this life and existence into a much bigger

framework.

I heard a Buddhist teacher recently criticize this type of teaching as escapist. Well, it is. Existence is like a big prison. In this prison, there is maximum security, medium security, solitary confinement, chain gangs, minimum security, and the whole range of incarceration. Minimum security may not be so bad, but it is still prison. And eventually you will end up on a chain gang, anyway.

If you are in prison, you want to get out. At least, I think you do, although some people don't.

Given the scale and the scope of limitless time, you do not just get to write your own ticket. You don't get to dictate all of your rebirths through time and space. The only safety is to get out of the complex and unpredictable sphere of causes and conditions.

The cosmology also has implications for how you die. As noted, you want to die in a setting that will not disturb the consciousness. Many Tibetan Lamas have been trained to usher the consciousness through the transition. They keep the atmosphere calm. You want to avoid a bunch of medical people running around, frantically stuffing tubes into you and running loud machines that go "beep."

You would like to have someone by your side who can keep things calm, and especially someone who can help you remember all of the wonderful things you did. You want to die with gratitude.

When the consciousness leaves the body, ideally you will take a pass on any form of rebirth, leave the uncertainty of saṃsara, and enter the unconditioned. If you cannot do that, attain as high a rebirth as you can with the aspiration to continue to practice the Dharma.

This is all about the big picture. This path is not just about dealing with an unhappy job or being a little less stressed out on the drive to work or making up with your significant other. The stakes are enormous. The whole of existence is full of risks. It is all a bit of a crap shoot. We can



improve the odds, but there are never any guarantees. The Buddha's final words before his passing were these:

*Then the Lord said to the monks: "Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay - strive on untiringly." These were the Tathāgata's last words. - [DN 16.6.7]*

The only way out is to awaken.

## 8. Postscript

The first three sections of this Little Book can be summarized as follows:

1. Did the Buddha teach the transmigration of beings from one lifetime to the next? Yes.
2. Is there evidence that rebirth is true? Yes.
3. Do you have to believe in rebirth and to see into the truth of rebirth to awaken? Probably. (Yes.)

The Buddha's teachings on rebirth are fundamental to the path that he taught. They create a sense of urgency about the meaning of our lives and how we should be spending our time and energy. This is serious business.

There is a term in Buddhism that speaks to this. That term is *saṃvega*:

*[saṃvega is] the oppressive sense of shock, dismay, and alienation that come with realizing the futility and meaninglessness of life as it's normally lived; a chastening sense of our own complacency and foolishness in having let ourselves live so blindly; and an anxious sense of urgency in trying to find a way out of the meaningless cycle.*

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy*, "[Affirming the Truths of the Heart: The Buddhist Teachings on Samvega & Pasada](#)"]

I heard a story some years ago about a young man from Thailand. In Thailand almost all young men go into a Buddhist monastery for some period of time. It is a rite of passage. So this young man went into a monastery and took temporary ordination as a monk for six months.

He left behind a young woman with whom he was very much in love, and she was very much in love with him. Everyone assumed that they would get married when he finished his time as a monk. But his time in the monastery changed him, and when he left the monastery he was very conflicted.

Finally he decided to ordain permanently as a monk and devote his life to practice and awakening. When he talked to his young woman she was, of course, very distraught. But he explained to her that he now understood that he had lived this life a million times before. He had fallen in love, gotten married, had children, died, and then done it over and over and over again.

That is why this Little Book falls into the transcendent method of Buddhist practice. We are no longer talking about how to reduce stress or to simply live “mindfully” in the world. We have expanded greatly on the Buddha’s simple declaration of the First Noble Truth:

*“And what is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.” - [MN 28.3]*

The teachings on rebirth put the First Noble Truth into a larger and more pressing context.

And this brings us back to that word *saṃvega*. The Buddha said that there are two reactions to the futility of mundane existence. The first one is dismay, shock, horror, a sense of hopelessness, and even depression.

The other reaction is determination to find a way out. Very fortunately for us the Buddha jumped down into the manhole with us. He has been here and he knows the way out.

*Those who*

*Fully cultivate the Factors of Awakening,*

*Give up grasping,*

*Enjoy non-clinging,*

*And have destroyed the toxins,*

*Are luminous,*

*And completely liberated in this life.*

- [Dhp 89]

# Appendices

## Appendix A - Glossary of Terms

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### Abhidhamma (Pāli, Sanskrit: Abhidharma)

The *Abhidhamma* is the third of the “three baskets” in the Pāli Canon, although scholars date it to 100 to 200 years after the time of the Buddha. It has been variously described as philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The *Abhidhamma* is highly revered in the Theravada tradition, and highly criticized in the others (!).

### Ajahn (also Ajaan)

Thai word meaning “teacher.” In Buddhism it is a monk who has at least ten years of seniority.

### Aṅguttara Nikāya

Literally *Increased by One Collection*, but usually translated as *Numerical Discourses*. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* is organized in eleven books according to the number of items referenced in them (i.e., the Four Noble Truths is in the Book of Fours).

### arahant (Pāli, Sanskrit: arahat)

Literally “one who is worthy,” a perfected person, i.e., one who has attained nirvāṇa.

### awakening

Also called “enlightenment.” It is a sudden insight into transcendent, ultimate truth. This is the goal of the Buddha’s system of training. After awakening one is free from un-necessary suffering, and after death is free from all suffering. In Buddhist cosmology a fully awakened person, or “arahant,” is free from the rounds of rebirth.

### **Bhante (Pāli)**

Literally “Venerable Sir.” A senior Buddhist monastic who has been ordained at least ten years. Although it is a masculine term it is gender neutral and is used for both monks and nuns.

### **bhikkhu (Pāli, Sanskrit: bhikṣu)**

Literally “beggar.” An ordained Buddhist monk. However the term can also refer to anyone following the Buddhist path. When the Buddha gave a talk he would address it to the highest ranking persons there. The rank order was 1) monks, 2) nuns, 3) lay men, and 4) lay women. Thus if even one monk were present, he would address the talk to “bhikkhus.”

### **Bodhisatta (Pāli, Sanskrit: Bodhisattva)**

The term used by the Buddha to refer to himself both in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life, prior to his awakening, in the period during which he was working towards his own liberation.

### **deva**

In the Buddhist cosmology devas are gods or heavenly beings that live in the realm just above humans.

### **Dharma (Sanskrit, Pāli: dhamma)**

In Buddhism, the word “dharma” can have three different

meanings. The first meaning is the *universal nature of how things are*. At the time of the Buddha, each religious school had its own Dharma, or understanding of how things are. The second meaning of Dharma is the *teachings of the Buddha*. The third meaning is *phenomena*. Buddhism sees everything in terms of causes and affects. Mental activities, for example, are *dharmas*. When referring to the teachings of the Buddha, the word *Dharma* is capitalized. When referring to phenomena, it is not capitalized.

**Dhammapada-aṭṭhakatha** (“aṭṭhakathā” is Pāli for explanation, commentary)

Commentary to the Dhammapada.

## **Digha Nikāya**

The “Long Discourses” (Pāli *digha* = “long”). It is the first of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. Pāli scholar Joy Manné makes the argument that the *Digha Nikāya* was particularly intended to make converts (Bhikkhu Bodhi pointedly refers to this as “for the purpose of propaganda”), with its high proportion of debates and devotional material.

## **Eight Precepts**

These are lay precepts for people who want to practice more intensively. They are often observed on Uposatha Days. The additional precepts (to the Five Precepts) are: 1) refrain from eating after noon, 2) refraining from entertainment, wearing jewelry or using perfumes, and 3) sleeping on luxurious beds or over-sleeping.

## **fetters**

Literally a “chain” that shackles one to the rounds of rebirth. The fetters are 1) self-identity view, 2) attachment to rites and rituals, 3) doubt, 4) sense desire, 5) ill will 6) desire for material existence, 7) desire for immaterial existence, 8) conceit, 9) restlessness, and 10)

ignorance.

### **Five Faculties**

Also called the “Five Strengths” or the “Five Spiritual Faculties.” They are 1) faith, 2) energy (vigor/diligence), 3) mindfulness, 4) concentration, and 5) wisdom.

### **Four Foundations of Mindfulness**

Also called the Four Establishings of Mindfulness, and the Four Frames of Reference. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are 1) the body, 2) feelings, or “feeling tones,” 3) mental formations, and 4) mental phenomena.

### **jhāna** (Pāli, Sanskrit: dhyāna)

“meditative absorption.” The jhānas are states of high concentration. In the final formulation there are four “material” jhānas and four “immaterial” jhānas.

### **kōan** (Japanese, also kung-an)

A kōan is a riddle or puzzle that Zen Buddhists use during meditation to overcome conceptual thinking in order to unravel a greater truth.

### **Majjhima Nikāya**

*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.* It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. It is generally believed to be the most important collection of discourses in the Canon. The *Majjhima Nikāya* corresponds to the *Madhyama Āgama* which survives in two Chinese translations. Fragments also exist in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

### **Māra** (Pāli, Sanskrit)



Literally “bringer of death.” Māra is a deity who embodies the ability of experience, especially sensory experience, to seduce and trap the mind, particularly to prevent the cessation of suffering.

**nibbāna** (Pāli, Sanskrit: nirvāṇa)

Nibbāna is one of the terms that is used to define the goal of the Buddhist path. It literally means “to extinguish,” and means to extinguish the three flames of greed, hatred, and delusion.

**non-returner** (Pāli, Sanskrit: anāgāmi)

The third of four stages of awakening. A non-returner eliminates the fourth and fifth “fetters” – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more rebirths in the material realm.

**once-returner** (Pāli: sakadāgāmin, Sanskrit: sakṛdāmin)

The second of four stages of awakening. A once-returner has weakened the fourth and fifth “fetters” – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more than one more rebirth in the material realm.

## **Pāli Canon**

The Pāli Canon is the collection of Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language. It consists of three *Pitakas*, or “baskets.” These are the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the monastic code), the *Sutta Pitaka* (the discourses of the Buddha and his senior disciples), and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, a later work that is variously described as Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is unique to Theravada, or southern, Buddhism; the other collections have versions in the Chinese and Tibetan Canons.

**parinibbāna** (Pāli, Sanskrit: parinirvāṇa)

Literally “nibbāna after death.” When the body of an arahant dies,

this frees the being from saṃsara, the rounds of rebirth.

### **Pātimokkha** (Pāli, Sanskrit: Prātimokṣa)

Literally “towards liberation.” It is the list of monastic rules in the Vinaya.

### **Saṅgha** (Pāli, Sanskrit: saṅgha)

Literally “community.” At the time of the Buddha the term Saṅgha referred either to the community of monastics (monks and nuns) or the noble Saṅgha, which is the community of people who are stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arahants.

### **Satipaṭṭhāna** (Pāli)

The “Four Foundations of Mindfulness”: (1) the body, (2), feelings/sensations, (3) mental formations (thoughts and emotions), and (4) *dharma*s, or phenomena.

### **Samāṇa** (Pāli, Sanskrit: Śramaṇa)

A wandering ascetic.

### **Samyutta Nikāya**

*The Connected Discourses.* It is the third of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon. *The Samyutta Nikāya* consists of fifty-six chapters, each governed by a unifying theme that binds together the Buddha’s suttas or discourses.

### **Seven Factors of Awakening** (enlightenment)

(1) Mindfulness, (2) investigation, (3) energy, (4) joy/rapture, (5) tranquility, (6) concentration, and (7) equanimity.

### **stream-entry** (Pāli: sotāpanna, Sanskrit: srotāpanna)

The first of four stages of awakening. A stream-enterer overcomes the first three “fetters” – self view, attachment to rites and rituals and skeptical doubt – and will become an arahant in no more than seven lifetimes with no rebirths in the lower realms.

**sutta** (Pāli, Sanskrit: sutra)

A discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. The Pāli word “sutta” refers specifically to the Pāli Canon. The words “sutta” and the Sanskrit form “sutra” literally mean “thread,” and are related to the English word “suture.”

**Tathāgata** (Pāli, Sanskrit)

A word the Buddha used when referring to himself. It’s literal meaning is ambiguous. It can mean either “thus gone” (tathā-gata) or “thus come” (tathā-āgata). It is probably intentionally ambiguous, meaning that the Buddha, having attained a final awakening, was beyond all comings and goings.

**Upāsaka** (masculine), **Upāsikā** (feminine) (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally “attendant.” A lay follower of the Buddha, one who has taken and keeps the Five Precepts.

**Uposatha** (Pāli, Sanskrit: Upavasatha)

Traditionally held on the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month. This is the day when monastics gather to recite the Pātimokkha (monastic rules) and confess any transgressions. Lay people observe either the Five Precepts or, if they spend the day at a temple or monastery, the Eight Precepts.

**Visuddhimagga** (Pāli)

Literally, *The Path of Purification*. The *Visuddhimagga* is a Theravada commentarial work attributed to the monk Buddhaghosa, who

formulated it in Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE.

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